

Preparing Students to Communicate in the Workplace

Summary

This issue of the ELIS Research Digest reviews studies on the desired communication skills in the workplace and higher education before looking at the teaching of these desired communication skills in schools. The reviewed studies showed that although employers valued oral communication skills highly, especially listening skills, and that communication in multilingual and multicultural settings was important, the teaching practices in schools did not reflect this importance. Approaches suggested by various writers on how teaching and assessment practices in primary and secondary schools can be modified are presented. Experiential learning methods were recommended for the teaching and learning of communications skills rather than didactic methods.

Introduction

It has long been recognized that children need to learn in school the skills necessary to fulfil their future roles as workers and citizens (Heath, 2007). Among the skills that children need to be taught are communication skills, which are widely recognized as crucial for success (Morreale & Pearson, 2008). Morreale and Pearson (2008) claimed that 'most would agree that competence in oral communication is prerequisite to academic, personal, and professional success. However, while humans are born with the ability to vocalize, they are not born with a full accoutrement of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that constitute communication competence. The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately is learned and, therefore, can and should be taught' (p. 225).

The American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2010) identified communication to be an important skill needed by students and stated in Appendix B of their white paper that to communicate clearly, students needed to:

- Articulate thoughts and ideas effectively using oral, written and nonverbal communication skills in a variety of forms and contexts;
- Listen effectively to decipher meaning, including knowledge, values, attitudes and intentions;
- Use communication for a range of purposes

(e.g. to inform, instruct, motivate, and persuade);

- Utilize multiple media and technologies, and know how to judge their effectiveness a priori as well as assess their impact; [and]
- Communicate effectively in diverse environments (including multi-lingual). (Appendix B)

The recent report on the results of a survey of adult skills used by 16- to 65-year-olds conducted by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicated that writing and reading were among the most frequently used skills at work in participating countries (OECD, 2016). The results of the survey showed that reading and writing skills were valued in the workplace and that the use of reading skills was found to be strongly correlated with wages.

The OECD survey results are limited to the use of written communication skills by employees as the OECD did not survey the use of oral communication skills in the workplace. Nonetheless, according to Carnevale and Smith (2013) and Stone, Lightbody, and Whait (2013), oral communication skills are rated highly by employers. Indeed, oral communication skills are thought to be more important than written communication skills by accounting practitioners (Siriwardane & Durden, 2014). Cameron and Dickfos (2014) emphasized that accounting educators needed to tell their students the importance of oral communication skills for employment and career success. Siriwardane, Low, and Blietz (2015), Gray and Murray (2011), and

Darling and Dannels (2003) noted that workplace communication practice was characterized by informal oral communication in small groups rather than formal presentations. However, Crosling and Ward (2002) argued that undergraduates' training in oral communication was inadequate for workplace oral communication because they were usually trained in giving formal oral presentations but not for informal oral communication such as work-related discussions, following instructions, and social conversations. Siriwardane et al. (2015) suggested that educators should 'find ways to sharpen graduates' informal speaking skills. Rather than using group presentations where students practice and give a formal presentation, often using visual aids, role playing can be used' (p. 345).

Peter D. Hart Research Associates (2005) found that high school students felt that they were not well prepared for the workplace or tertiary institutions in terms of oral communication skills. They surveyed young adults in America and found that more American high school graduates felt that they had gaps in their oral communication skills compared to their writing skills. Similarly, they found that more American undergraduates reported gaps in their oral communication skills than in their written.

Goh (2005) found that in Singapore schools, teachers placed more emphasis on written communication skills than oral communication skills. She pointed out that 'listening and speaking, which had little examination weighting, had been neglected' (p. 101). She noted that 'reading and writing, which combined to carry the greatest weighting, especially in secondary school examinations, were given an exceptionally high priority in the use of class time' (p. 101). The weighting for speaking and listening components for the high-stakes GCE O-level English Language examination is now higher than in the past. Previously, 20% of the marks was awarded to the listening and speaking components (Ministry of Education, 2006). Currently, the weighting on these components has increased to 30%, with 10% of the total marks awarded to listening comprehension and another 20% to oral communication (Ministry of Education, 2016).

Vaish (2008) noted that contrary to what was expected in the English Language curriculum, students in Singapore schools were not encouraged

to engage in extended oral narratives in the classroom. She recommended that interventions in the English Language classroom needed to be focused on changing the questioning patterns of teachers and encouraging more extended student talk by including more activities such as student presentations.

In summary, although oral communication skills are highly valued by employers, researchers have pointed out that assessment and classroom practices in Singapore primary and secondary schools do not seem to reflect this importance. Written communication skills are given more importance in primary and secondary schools as well as in tertiary institutions. Thus, students may not be well-prepared for speaking and listening in the workplace, and more attention needs to be paid to the development of their speaking and listening skills.

In this issue, we will first examine the communication skills desired in the workplace. We will then look into research concerning the desired communication skills in higher education. Research findings regarding the desired communication skills and the implementation of their instruction in higher education will be taken into account in the discussion on how communication skills can be more effectively taught and learnt in primary and secondary schools. Subsequently, we will examine the teaching of the desired oral communication skills in Singapore schools. Finally, we will discuss the possible changes that researchers in the field have suggested could be made to teaching practices in primary and secondary schools in Singapore to prepare students for the oral communication skills desired in the workplace.

Communication skills desired in the workplace

Research has identified two aspects of desirability with regard to communication skills in the workplace. Firstly, oral communication skills, especially listening skills, are highly valued (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Ellis, Kisling, & Hackworth, 2014; Maguire & Pitceathly, 2002; Robles, 2012; Siriwardane & Durden, 2014; Siriwardane et al., 2015). Secondly, in an interconnected world, employees who are able to communicate effectively in multilingual and multicultural settings are also highly valued (Chong, 2007; Jansen, 2002; Riemer, 2007; Tay, Ang, & Hegney, 2012).

Carnevale and Smith (2013) emphasized that communication skills were highly valued in American workplaces. They pointed out that five of the top 12 most valued skills were the ability to (a) listen, (b) interpret, (c) follow instructions, and (d) communicate these instructions to others in writing, and (e) communicate them orally. They also noted that high levels of written and oral abilities were required in the majority of jobs.

Robles (2012) found that all 57 American business executives surveyed deemed communication, comprising both oral and written communication, to be very important or extremely important. Ninety-one per cent of the executives found communication skills to be extremely important. Robles (2012) stated that one of the main challenges in teaching communication was that educators had not yet figured out how to teach these skills and how to evaluate the impact of communication training on learners. He recommended that communication skills be integrated into the business curriculum and that teaching and assessment strategies support the use of case studies as an instructional method to capture different student learning styles and, thereby, develop students' skills as they apply them in these diverse and unfamiliar scenarios.

Ellis et al. (2014) reported that listening, a communication skill, was the second most important soft skill for American employers. They defined soft skills as skills that are not of a technical or technological nature. The third most important soft skill was the ability to serve clients and customers, defined as working and communicating with clients and customers to satisfy their expectations. However, these soft skills did not receive the expected content emphasis in texts required in office technology courses.

In Europe, Andrews and Higson (2008) examined graduate employability in terms of soft skills and hard business knowledge through surveying 30 business graduates and 20 business employers across Austria, the United Kingdom, Slovenia, and Romania. The interview and survey results showed that the business employers identified written and oral communications skills as very important in the

workplace, especially for report writing and presentations. The results also suggested that the majority of the business graduates felt that their business education had equipped them with writing skills but they did not feel equally equipped with the oral presentation skills necessary for the work environment.

Oral communication skills are also important in the medical sector. In a review of key communication skills that were needed for doctors to communicate effectively with their patients in the United Kingdom, Maguire and Pitceathly (2002) found that doctors had problems communicating with their patients in the following key tasks:

- Eliciting (a) the patient's main problems; (b) the patient's perceptions of these; and (c) the physical, emotional, and social impact of the patient's problems on the patient and family;
- Tailoring information to what the patient wanted to know and checking his or her understanding;
- Eliciting the patient's reactions to the information given and his or her main concerns;
- Determining how much the patient wanted to participate in decision making (when treatment options were available);
- Discussing treatment options so that the patient understood the implications; [and]
- Maximising the chance that the patient would follow agreed decisions about treatment and advice about changes in lifestyle (p. 697).

In technical communication, Jansen (2002) underscored the importance of clear communication among engineers from different cultures as breakdowns in communication or miscommunication could lead to tragic accidents such as aircraft crashes and collapsed structures.

Siriwardane and Durden (2014) found that in their review of communication skills of accountants from 1972 to 2012, practising accountants ranked oral communication skills more highly than written communication skills, especially for recently graduated accountants. Listening

was considered to be a key communication skill by practising accountants. They perceived casual oral and written communication to be more important than formal oral and written communication. Siriwardane and Durden (2014) believed that accounting programmes might not be 'emphasizing or prioritizing the communication skills considered most critical to the profession' (p. 133). Siriwardane et al. (2015) argued that their findings

highlighted 'some of the skills universities emphasize, but might not be required by industry (especially the ability to create visual aids and give formal presentations), at least for Singapore ELAs' (entry-level accountants) (p. 344).

Siriwardane and Durden (2014) pointed out that communication skills required to be successful in the accounting field changed as accountants progressed in their careers and that it was likely that the importance of communication skills would increase. They gave the following examples of communication skills that accountants should have:

... accountants should have the appropriate communication skills to perform communication tasks. Examples of oral communication tasks include giving presentations, conducting small group meetings and answering clients' questions. Examples of oral communication skills include informal speaking skills, formal presentation skills and listening skills. Effectiveness of oral communication also depends on various elements of speech such as clarity, brevity and tone. In a similar manner, written communication tasks require different skills and elements. (Siriwardane & Durden, 2014, p. 122)

Following their review in 2014, Siriwardane et al. (2015) conducted a survey of 53 professionals in public accounting and company accounting, and government and tax accounting in Singapore, the majority of whom had 10 or more years of experience and found that listening skills were perceived to be the most important skills for entry-level accountants in Singapore. Listening responsiveness and listening attentiveness were the two most important communication skills. The most frequently performed tasks required entry-level accountants to use informal oral and written communication skills. The three most frequent oral communication tasks were found to be (a) engaging in informal discussions, (b) conducting telephone conversations, and (c) receiving oral feedback. They found that the three most frequently conducted written communication tasks were preparing working papers, writing electronic messages, and preparing numerical schedules and statements with narratives. The three most important written communication attributes were clearly expressed ideas, correct grammar, and concise language while the three most important oral communication attributes

were clarity of ideas, confidence, and concise language. For both speaking and writing, the most important attribute was clarity.

Gray and Murray (2011) reported that in New Zealand, employers of accounting graduates also considered oral communication skills to be extremely important. The survey data revealed that for new graduates, accountancy employers valued listening skills as well as professional oral communication with clients on the telephone and the seeking of clarification or feedback from managers. However, the employers found that recently graduated accountancy graduates fell short of the desired level of oral communication skills even though having these skills would improve the graduates' chances of getting hired and of progressing in their career. The interview data revealed that having excellent oral communication skills was becoming increasingly important due to globalization and that being able to adapt to cross-cultural communication was particularly important.

Besides oral communication skills, effective intercultural communication, that is, communication between people from two or more different cultures, is valued by employers (Riemer, 2007). In an increasingly globalized world, workers need to be able to communicate with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Du-Babcock, 2006; E. C. H. Lim, Oh, & Seet, 2008; Mok, 2014; Tay et al., 2012). Yet, Du-Babcock (2013) pointed out that there had been very little systematic examination of the use of English in intercultural communication situations by speakers of English from non-traditional English-speaking countries although English had become the lingua franca in international business contexts. Kim (2010) asserted that the research conducted had the tendency to follow a 'Western' paradigm and that there was a need for more fine-grained analyses of variation of communication practices in different communities in Asia. This type of research is important because as Jansen (2002) noted, many companies, including small and medium sized enterprises as well as large corporations, were engaged in international business and therefore engineers, managers and senior management had to communicate with people from different cultures. In technical communication, Jansen (2002) underscored the importance of clear communication among engineers from different cultures as breakdowns in communication or miscommunication could lead

to tragic accidents such as aircraft crashes and collapsed structures.

Businesses value employees who are able to show that they possess intercultural and interpersonal communication skills through their verbal and non-verbal behaviour. For example, Chong (2007) noted that employees of Singapore Airlines were required to have intercultural communication and negotiation skills because they dealt with difficult customers. He noted that they had to undergo training programmes that included experienced international crew members sharing their knowledge of their own culture's verbal and behavioural subtleties. In this way, all crew members could acquire the necessary intercultural and interpersonal communication skills when dealing with customers who did not share their cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Tay et al. (2012) found that one of the factors affecting effective communication between Singapore nurses and their patients was whether the nurses had cultural knowledge concerning their patients.

Communication skills desired in higher education settings

Consistent with the findings of the importance of communication skills in the workplace, communication skills are highly valued in various faculties in higher education settings in Singapore as well as other countries in the world. According to Dong et al. (2015), E. C. H. Lim et al. (2008), and Maguire and Pitceathly (2002), communication skills are highly valued in the medical field as doctors are expected to communicate well with their patients. In Singapore, doctors have to undergo practical clinical examinations during which they are assessed on their history-taking skills, their facility in communicating clinical information to colleagues, patients and their relatives as well as on their discussion of ethical issues (E. C. H. Lim et al., 2008). These examinations are important as they play an important role in the certification of candidates for the practice of medicine (E. C. H. Lim et al., 2008).

E. C. H. Lim et al. (2008) reported on an intervention in which the authors conducted four medical communication courses for weaker candidates for

these examinations. These medical communication courses focused on role-play. Unlike conventional role-play, the candidates had to enact both the roles of the doctor and the patient. At the end of each role-play, feedback was given to the candidate who role-played the doctor. The feedback was on verbal and non-verbal cues, and the use of medical vocabulary among other criteria. The majority of the participants of the study felt that role-playing both the doctor and the patient was useful because it gave them the opportunity to see how real-life patients might think and react. Three participants felt that they could empathize with their real-life patients in similar contexts.

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E. C. H. Lim et al. (2008) found that the participants who had initially expressed that they had linguistic difficulties benefited most from

the medical communication course. They reported that they felt increased confidence in their communication skills as a result of having participated in the dual role-play medical communication course.

In business and medical faculties, the ability to communicate in multilingual or multicultural settings was also expected of students and graduates (Du-Babcock, 2006; E. C. H. Lim et al., 2008; Mok, 2014; Tay et al., 2012). Du-Babcock (2006) recommended that business communication programmes should focus on helping students to adapt and communicate effectively in present and future communication settings, and suggested helping students develop the following competencies:

- To interact in a multilingual and multicultural environment in which individuals have different language proficiency and use different professional genres; [and]
- Adjust to the varying linguistic and cultural competencies of their communication partners. (p. 263)

Students also needed to be prepared to 'use communication technologies effectively to provide real-time information and message exchange with counterparts in remote locations and in virtual organizations' (Du-Babcock, 2006, p. 263).

Linsdell and Anagnos (2011) emphasized that not

only did engineers need to have technical competence, they also needed to have excellent communication skills to interact in engineering teams as well as in interdisciplinary teams. The authors found that employers in the Silicon Valley were not satisfied with the communication skills of engineering graduates. Therefore, engineering educators redesigned the engineering curriculum so that engineering students could experience the different types of writing found in the workplace, such as emails, memos, incident reports, progress reports, feasibility studies, and proposals. Engineers were expected to have the following skills (Linsdell & Anagnos, 2011, p. 21):

- Effective organizational communication;
- Ability to analyse audiences and give them appropriate information;
- Real-world communication skills;
- Ability to understand standards, methods, and issues that matter in the workplace; and
- Ability to concisely and accurately report research findings.

In Australia, Brodie (2009) pointed out that engineering students needed to have the skills to work globally in a multicultural context in which they had to communicate in interdisciplinary teams in a virtual environment using digital tools. She conducted a study whose aim was to explore whether using an online problem-solving learning course could develop effective electronic communication skills among other objectives, for both distance and on-campus engineering students. These students had to work in virtual teams whose members shared a common objective, worked independently and were linked only by communication technologies as they were separated by distance. They conducted online team meetings, and used a variety of digital communication tools to communicate and solve complex engineering problems based on real-world scenarios. The results of the study showed that the majority of the students believed that the online course gave them opportunities for social interaction. Brodie (2009) pointed out that this interaction was possible because the design of the course included group work that required communication among members of virtual teams.

In Singapore, Mok (2014) found that the intercultural and interpersonal aspects of communication were important skills that business students

needed in order to communicate effectively and persuasively in business settings. Singapore science undergraduates were expected to read science-related topics, to question published scientific information, and to articulate opinions and perspectives both in the oral and written forms (Ng et al., 2014). At the end of a communication course designed for these science students, while the majority of students indicated that they improved in their oral and written communication skills, a higher percentage of students perceived that they had improved in their oral rather than their written communication skills. Mok (2014) concluded that it was important for science undergraduates to have a mandatory communication module in the core curriculum.

In summary, the review of desired communication skills in higher education and the learning activities that take place to achieve them yields useful lessons for improving the preparation of students for the workplace. One lesson learnt is that students need to have real world scenarios to be able to develop their communication skills (Brodie, 2009; E. C. H. Lim et al., 2008; Linsdell & Anagnos, 2011). These scenarios should include students having to communicate with speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Du-Babcock, 2006; E. C. H. Lim et al., 2008). Students can engage in role-play and practise their written and oral communication skills (E. C. H. Lim et al., 2008). Second, students should be provided opportunities to work in virtual teams to practise communication in that context (Brodie, 2009; Du-Babcock, 2006). Third, a compulsory course on communication can help students improve their communication skills, especially oral skills (Mok, 2014).

However, there are barriers to the implementation of communication skills instruction in higher education settings. For example, Stone et al. (2013) highlighted that barriers faced by accounting educators for the development of their students' listening skills were (a) limited educator/student contact, (b) a crowded accounting curriculum, (c) students' perceptions, (d) the challenge of large classes, (e) an increasing educator workload, and (f) listening assessment. Engineering educators faced similar challenges. Riemer (2007) listed the barriers faced by engineering educators as (a) students' views on communication, (b) the insufficiency of course content, (c) inadequate or inappropriate

teaching approaches, and (d) engineering students not having enough opportunity to practise communication skills.

Given the barriers to improving communication skills instruction in post-secondary education noted by Stone et al. (2013) and Riemer (2007), secondary school students may need to be more prepared in terms of communication skills before they leave school. From the review of desired communication skills in the workplace, employers seem to find that the greatest gap lies in the oral communication skills of entry-level employees (Crosling & Ward, 2002; Ellis et al., 2014; Gray & Murray, 2011; Siriwardane et al., 2015). In the following sections, we will therefore focus on the research on the oral communication teaching practices in Singapore primary and secondary schools, and we will present the changes suggested by researchers that can be made to prepare students for the desired oral communication skills in the workplace.

Oral communication teaching practices in Singapore primary and secondary schools

Although oral communication skills, especially listening, are valued by employers and tertiary institutions, there has been little research conducted on listening in Singapore primary (Goh & Taib, 2006) and secondary schools (Zhang & Goh, 2006). More research on listening has been conducted for foreign students at Singapore tertiary institutions (e.g., Goh, 1997, 2000, 2002).

Moreover, Goh (2005) reported that English Language teachers in Singapore primary and secondary schools considered listening comprehension to be less important compared with reading comprehension, composition writing, grammar, and vocabulary when they determined the amount of time that should be allocated to teaching these aspects of the English Language syllabus. For instance, 10% of the secondary school teachers in a questionnaire survey of 2,681 English Language teachers in primary and secondary schools in Singapore considered listening very important or extremely important while 25% of the primary school teachers considered it very important or extremely important. Only 41% of the primary school teachers considered oral activities very important or extremely important and 30% of the secondary school

teachers considered oral activities very important or extremely important. In contrast, other non-oral aspects of the English Language syllabus were considered much more important. For instance, 66% of the primary school teachers and 85% of the secondary school teachers considered composition writing very important or extremely important, and 71% of the primary school teachers and 75% of the secondary school teachers considered reading comprehension very important or extremely important.

Goh (2005) pointed out that from the interview data of the same study, 'primary school teachers recognized the importance of listening and speaking as a way by which children received valuable input and feedback for language development' (p. 101). Goh (2005) indicated that, although language learning activities in the English Language classroom would not replace talk in real world situations, she believed that oral activities, carefully planned, could help students learn important skills and learning strategies for talk. She added that these skills and learning strategies could also be applied in other subjects across the curriculum such as Science, Mathematics, and Social Studies. She emphasized:

However, when high stakes examinations are weighted heavily towards the written language, listening and speaking can be neglected, as the findings from the Singapore study have shown. This will have implications for pupils' development as learners and communicators. The full impact of such neglect, however, can only be known when considered against information on the use of oracy as a medium for thinking and learning across the entire school curriculum (pp. 104-105).

Listening

Listening strategies have been investigated in Singapore schools (Goh & Taib, 2006; Zhang & Goh, 2006). Goh and Taib (2006) examined whether 10 primary school students who were taught listening learning strategies improved in their listening. During the intervention, the students were explicitly taught listening comprehension learning strategies through the following procedures:

(a) Reflection and discussion;

- (b) Teacher modelling; and
- (c) Integrated sequences of activities that focused alternately on text and process.

Although the students showed an improvement in their listening scores after the intervention, there was no comparison or control group and thus a causal link could not be established. As Renandya (2012) cautioned for published studies of listening strategy instruction in mainstream English language teaching journals, there is an absence of tightly controlled experimental studies showing positive impacts of listening strategy instruction. He argued that in such studies, the data collected had not shown a strong causal link between listening strategy instruction and listening ability.

At the secondary level in Singapore, Zhang and Goh (2006) investigated 278 students' knowledge and use of 40 listening and speaking learning strategies and how these learning strategies were related. They found that the students tended to find all groups of learning strategies (use-focused, form-focused, comprehension, and communication) useful. The students found 32 out of 40 learning strategies useful or most useful but only reported using 13 frequently or very frequently. In general, the students perceived that use-focused learning strategies were more useful than form-focused ones and reported using the former more often than the latter. This is congruent with what employers desire in their employees as pointed out by Siriwardane et al. (2015) who found that practising accountants valued clearly expressed ideas more than correct grammar.

The following use-focused learning strategies are ranked in order of the percentage of the students finding them useful or most useful:

- (a) Watching English TV programmes and movies;
- (b) Listening to English radio;
- (c) Reading English newspapers and magazines to enlarge knowledge of the world;
- (d) Thinking in English when thinking about what to say;
- (e) Looking for opportunities to speak to a person who can speak good English;
- (f) Participating actively in communicative activities in class;
- (g) Mentally answering in English a question when their teacher has asked another student to answer;

- (h) Taking the initiative to answer teachers' questions whenever possible;
- (i) Using subtitles to check their interpretation when watching English movies; and
- (j) Orally summarizing the stories or texts they hear or read.

However, the students did not use all the above use-focused learning strategies often or very often. Only the following learning strategies were used by over 50% of the students: (a) watching English TV programmes and movies, (b) listening to English radio, (c) looking for opportunities to speak to a person who could speak good English, (d) using subtitles to check their interpretation when watching English movies, and (e) reading English newspapers and magazines to enlarge knowledge of the world.

For communication learning strategies, more than 59% of the students found the following communication learning strategies useful or most useful:

- (a) Asking the speaker to repeat something that they did not hear or understand;
- (b) Asking the speaker to explain something that they did not hear or understand;
- (c) Clarifying with words of similar meaning;
- (d) Trying to express their intentions in a different way;
- (e) Using examples to illustrate what they wanted to express; and
- (f) Telling the speaker what they understood and asking him/her to confirm the correctness of their understanding.

However, only over 57% of the students used the following communication learning strategies frequently or very frequently:

- (a) Asking the speaker to repeat something that they did not hear or understand;
- (b) Clarifying with words of similar meaning;
- (c) Asking the speaker to explain something that they did not hear or understand; and
- (d) Trying to express their intentions in a different way.

In summary, Zhang and Goh (2006) found that the students used use-focused learning strategies and recommended that teachers create opportunities for students to use these learning strategies in the school or classroom context as students valued active participation in the classroom to hone their

oral communication skills.

Speaking

Research on interventions to improve oral communication in Singapore schools is also scarce (Dunn & Stinson, 2011; Stinson & Freebody, 2006). Stinson and Freebody (2006) reported on the Drama and Oral Language (DOL) project that examined the influence of process drama on the oral communication results of 140 lowest-track Secondary 4 students in four Singapore secondary schools. Process drama is a particular style of drama used in an educational context in which participants improvise and work together in the development of the characters, events, and actions. It allows students to experiment with language (e.g., registers and vocabulary) in a safe setting.

In the DOL project, the process drama experience was designed to help the students to have greater confidence in speaking English. Over a series of 10 one-hour lessons, the students were involved in the negotiation and co-construction of a process drama. This allowed them to make the connection between the English language that they were learning in the classroom with what happened in their daily lives and the world surrounding them. Stinson and Freebody (2006) also pointed out that 'by participating in dialogue within the drama situation, students learn to use their language knowledge to create, and to respond to dialogue in varying contexts and for varying purposes' (p. 29). They outlined the benefits of working in roles based on the work of Clipson-Boyles (1998):

- It protects the student's self-esteem by de-personalizing a process which is, in reality, an extremely personal and sensitive part of a child's self-perception.
- It provides enjoyable reasons for speaking 'differently'.
- It offers the disguise or mask of someone different in which to experiment.
- It enables the teacher to correct the 'character' rather than the child.
- It helps children to understand diversity as opposed to one 'wrong way' of speaking and one 'correct way' of speaking.
- It provides a context for repetition, practice and preparation (Stinson & Freebody, 2006, pp. 29-30).

During the intervention, the students worked in small and large groups to solve the tasks given to them. They played both in and out of role. The groups were constantly changed so that the students worked regularly with different group members in the following language activities: interviewing, collaboratively creating roles and relationships, explaining, describing, persuading, sequencing ideas, questioning, and reporting.

The students participated in four process dramas: *The Missing Girl Drama*, *The Journey to the Centre of the Earth Drama*, *The Spy Drama*, and *The Legend of Bukit Merah Drama*. The researchers insisted that every student had to be given the opportunity to engage in oral communication in every lesson connected to the DOL project. For instance, for *The Missing Girl Drama*, the stimulus involved a newspaper article that reported on a missing girl who turned up a few days later but did not want or was unable to talk about her disappearance. The students were given roles as journalists to investigate the circumstances surrounding her disappearance. During this process drama, the students examined the evidence from the story and inferred from the evidence, interviewed individuals who knew the missing girl well, reported to the editor of the newspaper, and re-enacted events leading to the disappearance of the girl.

There were 70 students in the intervention group and another 70 in the comparison group. For the pre- and post-tests, the assessment was marked using the N-level marking criteria for the oral examination. The assessment criteria included speaking clearly, using appropriate vocabulary and structures, offering ideas and opinions relevant to the topic, interacting effectively, and needing little or no prompting by the examiner. The results indicated that the intervention produced a positive effect on the assessment criteria. Focus group interviews conducted with the intervention group students revealed that the students had more confidence in speaking English and expressing themselves and that they had had the opportunity to communicate with students who did not share their ethnicity.

Dunn and Stinson (2011) compared the results of the DOL project with an extension of the same project to Secondary 1 and 2 students of one of the four schools. Students from a school nearby

matched for student results and student socio-economic status served as a comparison group. The students from both the intervention and comparison schools sat for the same oral examinations four times throughout the year and participated in interviews. During five professional development workshops, 10 English Language teachers in the intervention school were trained in process drama that included the selection of material and the structuring of drama lessons. During a school drama camp, the researchers also modelled basic drama pedagogy for the teachers. Each teacher was also paired with a researcher to co-plan and co-teach a lesson if it was desired by the intervention teachers.

The results of the second quasi-experimental study were not significant. The authors believed that the difference in the quality of the instructors might have contributed to the differences in the results of the follow-up project and the original DOL project. The facilitators in the DOL project engaged to teach the intervention classes were graduates or near graduates of an advanced diploma in drama and drama education who attended a week-long training programme before the start of the DOL project intervention. In addition, the stimulus materials were chosen by two experienced drama educators. These materials helped the students become quickly engaged and connected to the process drama. In contrast, the teachers in the follow-up project lacked experience in drama. The authors found that the teachers applied drama strategies in isolation, in an unplanned way and did not have a deep understanding of how dramatic forms, conventions, and elements acted together. The teachers tended to choose materials from an English Language textbook or they did not choose any stimulus, such as a newspaper article, poem, email, picture or quote, to initiate the process drama.

Implications for school curriculum and assessment in Singapore

The above review of studies examining the teaching of oral communication skills in Singapore and the importance of oral communication skills in the workplace, indicates the need for greater emphasis on helping primary and secondary school students improve their listening skills across the curriculum in Singapore. Schools might need to review the time allocated to developing students'

oral communication skills, especially listening skills, and oral communication teaching and assessment practices so that the students will have the needed skills when they enter tertiary education and/or employment.

Developing students' listening skills

Research has shown that experiential learning methods such as role-plays and project team meetings yielded better outcomes in communication skills than purely didactic methods (Brodie, 2009; Ellis et al., 2014; E. C .H. Lim et al., 2008; Rees, Sheard, & McPherson, 2004; Riemer, 2007). To promote listening skills, teachers can therefore choose activities such as role-plays, project team meetings, pair and group discussions, and debates. These activities should not be limited to the English Language classrooms. Teachers can also create opportunities for their students to engage in listening activities outside class as survey findings have shown that students in Singapore enjoy listening to English radio and watching English TV programmes and movies (Zhang & Goh, 2006).

To encourage more oral interactions in Singapore schools, Teo (2014) suggested a focus on:

... the dynamics of interaction in our class to see how we can engender a classroom culture that enables and encourages our students to participate and contribute to substantive and dialogic exchanges may be one way to develop more confident, articulate and effective communicators in our students (p. 216).

In this way, students in Singapore schools would have plenty of practice in listening to one another, challenging the teacher or their peers, and making meaning together. Vaish (2013), who examined the questioning patterns of teachers in an early intervention programme in five Singapore primary schools, recommended that 'teacher education should come up with strategies which can be used in classrooms to encourage children to engage in genuine dialog with their teacher and their peers' (p. 540).

Developing students' communication skills in multilingual and multicultural contexts

Besides the promotion of more listening instruction, prior research has shown that there is the

need to develop students' communication skills in multilingual and multicultural settings (Canagarajah, 2006; House, 2012; McKay, 2011; Sharifan, 2013). Sharifan (2013) argued that English Language Teaching 'curricula should aim at developing competencies in learners that enable them to achieve success in intercultural communication with speakers from different cultural backgrounds' (p. 10). To prepare students to communicate in a multilingual and multicultural environment, House (2012) suggested that the curriculum could include the notion of speech acts (e.g., requests, apologies), discourse strategies, phases or stages, markers, turns and moves as well as cross-cultural variations in showing politeness, introducing topics, and following the sequences of topics. She also suggested that students could be shown intercultural misunderstandings in the medium of English as a lingua franca using the concepts of 'critical incidents' in the form of simulations, scenarios, or open role-plays. This form of experiential learning can be useful to students as they interpret, discuss, and problematize these interactions in class.

McKay (2011) proposed that the following pragmatic objectives should be included in a curriculum that considers English as an international language:

- Explicit attention should be given to introducing and practising repair strategies, such as asking for clarification and repetition, rephrasing and allowing wait time.
- A variety of conversational gambits or routines should be introduced and practised, including such items as expressing agreement and disagreement, managing turn-taking and taking leave.
- The curriculum should seek to promote students' understanding of how pragmatic norms can differ cross-culturally.
- Students should be free to express their own pragmatic norms but should recognize that, to the extent these standards differ from the norms expected by their listener, there may be cross-cultural misunderstandings. (p. 133)

House (2012) recommended that teachers train

their students to observe general rules of interaction in a multicultural or multilingual setting by using the following rules:

- Watch out for misunderstandings.
- Use checks to immediately clarify nascent problems.
- Use repair strategies whenever you suspect a misunderstanding, but make sure to avoid loss of your own face or of your interlocutor's face.
- Delay interpreting your interlocutor's moves as long as possible, and be always prepared to revise your preliminary interpretations.
- Be flexible and move back and forth from a micro- to a macro-perspective in your cumulative discourse interpretation.
- And finally: Never assume that others understand you (p. 202).

In order that students can develop their intercultural communicative skills, they also need to be exposed to a variety of material that shows how English is used in a wide range of settings and genres (Hillard, 2014; Matsuda, 2012; Sharifan, 2013; Shin, Eslami, & Chen, 2011; Wallace, 2012). Matsuda (2012) suggested that students could be introduced to different varieties of English through pre-packaged teaching materials and through supplementary materials which may not have been created for pedagogical purposes. For example, textual, audio, and visual samples of varieties of English other than British and American are now widely available online and can be used to show students different manifestations of cultural and linguistic values.

Matsuda (2012) proposed that teenage students could participate in interactive online communities as they represented authentic multilingual communicative situations. She noted that teachers could use this opportunity to discuss the appropriateness of the language used for these situations. For example, in Singapore, to help students to communicate with other students from other countries in virtual settings, schools could arrange for video conference calls using applications such as Skype or Facetime with children or adults from other countries. Students could be asked to write emails

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to request opportunities to communicate with foreigners.

Clipson-Boyles (2012) suggested that 'drama can be used to assist learning in various areas of the curriculum and thus offers a whole range of learning opportunities that can be used effectively in multi-lingual classrooms' (p. 105). She pointed out that role-play could meet the language needs of multilingual students appropriately and effectively. She listed the benefits of role-play for these students as:

- The provision of 'real' contexts for the language;
- Opportunities to hear others modelling the appropriate language;
- Opportunities to practise language and take risks with new vocabulary and constructions in an enjoyable and non-threatening situation; [and]
- Opportunities to 're-run' or 'repeat' language scenarios in order to practise fluency and expression, and build confidence (Clipson-Boyles, 2012, p. 108).

Clipson-Boyles (2012) also pointed out that 'using linguistic variation through drama can make it possible to present a range of language scenarios in order to motivate children to learn about language whilst at the same time developing their user skills in different situations' (p. 71). She suggested activities such as rehearsing situations (e.g., job interviews), looking at and performing different English dialects from stories and poems, transcribing English dialects from soap operas into Standard English and performing both versions, and recording radio advertisements with different English accents. She argued that students should be provided with multilingual skills to switch from one dialect to another with the knowledge of when and why it was appropriate to do so. In Singapore, it could mean that students should have the ability to switch between Singapore Colloquial English and Singapore Standard English, or between British Standard English and Singapore Standard English. It could also mean students could be trained in the ability to listen and understand conversations spoken by different English dialect speakers (e.g.,

Irish, Scottish, Indian) or by foreigners whose first language is not English.

In learning communication skills needed in the workplace and in tertiary institutions, students could also role-play as doctor-patient (E. C. H. Lim et al., 2008; Rees et al., 2004), nurse-patient or engineers in a team (Linsdell & Anagnos, 2011). How-

ever, unlike role-plays in tertiary institutions, these role-plays could extend to other real-life scenarios such as a waiter serving his customers, a salesperson selling a product, and a journalist interviewing an actor. Depending on the profiles of the students, teachers can adjust the language outcomes of these role-plays. The skills

can include both oral and written communication skills. For example, to take the history of a patient, a student would have to communicate orally with a patient who might not share the same ethnicity or nationality and the student would also have to take written notes as he conversed with the patient in the multilingual and multicultural setting.

Assessing students' oral communication skills

Riemer (2007) proposed that to be effective, the assessment of communication skills should have the following characteristics:

- Be formal so that it occurs at specific times and contributes to a student's marks.
- Provide feedback to be educational.
- Involve active participation by students in actual communication situations.
- Tackle student insights so that skills are identified and developed (p. 97).

To formally assess whether students are able to observe pragmatic rules of interaction, Hu (2012) suggested that test developers could consider devising language tasks that elicit these pragmatic strategies so as to ascertain whether the students had the necessary intercultural strategic competence to have a successful interaction in English. Canagarajah (2006) also argued that we needed to move from testing just grammatical competence to developing 'instruments that are sensitive to performance and pragmatics' (p. 229). He pointed

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out that assessment should focus on ‘strategies of negotiation, situated performance, communicative repertoire, and language awareness’ (p. 229).

Hu (2012) also suggested that test takers could be assessed on their sociolinguistic awareness and sensitivity to different varieties of English, other than British and American English, spoken in communities around the world. As Canagarajah (2006) argued, ‘the need to engage with multiple English varieties, even other languages, is so great in post-modern globalization that it is unwise for a speaker to develop competence in only one dialect—or one language system. It is more important to develop the cognitive abilities to negotiate multiple dialects as one shuttles between communities’ (p. 237).

The situational judgment approach might be a good way of assessing students’ knowledge of expected behaviour in a multicultural and multilingual environment. It is an assessment approach in which respondents read or view a situation presented to them and they have to select the most appropriate response among a series of possible responses (Kyllonen, 2008).

For formative assessment purposes, students can be trained to assess their own and their peers’ listening and speaking performance in actual communication situations using checklists or rubrics. For example, Canagarajah (2006) suggested that students needed to be assessed for their sociolinguistic sensitivity in a communication context. They needed to have feedback on whether they used interpersonal strategies such as repair, rephrasing, clarification, gestures, topic change, and other practices that are consensus-oriented and mutually supportive.

Conclusion

Given the high value placed on communication skills in the workplace, the researchers reviewed suggest that more attention has to be paid to improving students’ communication skills, especially

oral communication skills, to help them be successful in their careers and not plateau early in their career trajectory. The question is how schools will modify their teaching and assessment practices to meet these demands. Based on the findings of the studies reviewed in this digest, the oral communication skills of students need to be improved, especially their listening skills, and their communication in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Increasingly, students will have to learn to communicate with people from different language and cultural backgrounds. Educators will also need to be trained in designing assessments of these communication skills.

To ensure that students are taught communication skills well, it is imperative that educators teaching communication skills in schools be familiar with current teaching and learning approaches. The knowledge of these approaches, coupled with English Language content knowledge and subject-specific pedagogical skills might enable teachers to help their students become competent listeners and speakers. Daff (2012) suggested that those teaching communication skills could be invited to provide input into the regular classes to overcome the lack of training that some teachers might have in teaching these skills. Daff (2012) contended that a more team oriented approach to teaching would ensure that communication skills were taught not only in communications or English Language classes but also in subjects across the curriculum such as Science and Social Studies. Educators needed to provide more activities that addressed communication skills, particularly oral communication skills. Experiential learning methods were also recommended for the teaching and learning of communications skills rather than didactic methods (Rees et al., 2004; Riemer, 2007; Stinson & Freebody, 2006). These proposed changes can help bridge the gap between the communication skills that students possess and those employers expect.

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