

21st Century Skills: Fostering Cognitive Thinking in a selected class with Low English Proficiency (LEP) in the SACE International Programme (SACEi), Taylor’s College.

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ABSTRACT

Low English proficiency among students is one of the major issues faced by educators in Malaysian private education institutions.¹ This impacts the quality of learning as a whole. Furthermore, in view of the fact that many schools are moving away from the ‘factory model’² paradigm to one that focuses on the 3 Rs: Rigorous, Relevant and the Real World,³ there is pressure on educators to ensure that students, particularly those with low English proficiency are equipped to meet the new curriculum needs. This paper captures the author’s experience as a SACEi Legal Studies lecturer in fostering cognitive thinking in a class where students had low or average English language proficiency. The author argues that educators need to take a different pedagogical approach with students who have low English proficiency to help them succeed in the 21st century.

1.0 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The selected SACEi Legal Studies class comprises 13 students (6 females and 7 males). Most of the students in this class were educated in the Chinese vernacular schools prior to joining Taylor’s College. As Mandarin was their *lingua franca*, it was not surprising to hear the students communicating with each other in Mandarin. There were occasions where I have to remind them to use English to communicate with their peers during group discussions. On another occasion, I noticed one of the students actively acted as a translator (from English to Mandarin) to another student during my lesson.

The implication of these scenarios did not seem like a major problem at first: however, when I had graded their first written assessment (a formative assessment), I found that the low English language proficiency level was indeed an issue. 46.7% of the students’ grades in this class hovered between a ‘pass’ and ‘fail’. The main issue was low English proficiency. This issue hindered the students’ ability to express their ideas and opinions. This was a major concern for me as it was the first time in my teaching experience that I had such a big group of students identified with low English proficiency.

¹ Low Proficiency in English stifling ambitious students, *The Sun Daily*, 18th June 2015, <https://www.thesundaily.my/archive/1464693-ISARCH315493> (accessed on December 3, 2019)

² Focused on memorization of facts and passive learning through lectures.

³ *Curriculum Design For Your 21st Century Schools*, 21st Century Schools, <https://www.21stcenturyschools.com/curriculum-design.html> (accessed on December 3, 2019)

2.0 THE STRATEGIES

Strategy is significant as it influences how students process information in the learning process.⁴ Subsequently, this will also have an impact on the students' academic performance.⁵ Hence, it is essential for educators to employ appropriate strategies that will support the students' learning. In order to employ strategies that will help this selected class with low English proficiency, I have learnt to listen to the students' needs. In addition, I have made a conscious effort to create a learning environment that is conducive to learning where peer feedback and support are strongly encouraged.

2.1 Understanding the students' needs for learning support

Research have consistently shown that students' feedback is a valuable source of information for teachers in the improvement of their teaching.⁶ Students' feedback allows the teachers to reflect on their teaching⁷ and identify the needs of the students.⁸

In view of this, the first step I took was to get each student in class to write on their struggles in learning and the kind of support that they would like to see from me. The students were told to keep their identity anonymous. This was to encourage frank responses from the students. Furthermore, anonymous students' feedback also compels the students to reflect on their learning experience and provide suggestions on the type of learning that best suits them without the fear of being reprimanded in their assessments.⁹

2.2 Model Answer

The common response from the students, as gleaned from their jottings was requests to have model answers provided to them. Although, I opine that a model answer will stifle the student's

⁴ Richard, M., Learning Strategies: An Overview, Academic Press, 1988, pgs. 11-22, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780127424606500086> (accessed on 7th January, 2020)

⁵ Ibid, pgs. 11-22.

⁶ Ingvarson, L. and Reid, K., Improving practice through student feedback, *Teacher*, <https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/articles/improving-practice-through-student-feedback> (accessed on December 19, 2019)

⁷ Davis, V., 3 ways of getting students feedback to improve your teaching, *Edutopia*, <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/student-feedback-improves-your-teaching-vicki-davis> (accessed on December 19, 2019)

⁸ *Teaching Commons @ York*, York University, <https://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/for-cds/workshops-and-courses-for-cds/events-2/info/faculty-information-gateway/handbook-for-course-directors/evaluation-of-your-teaching-an> (accessed on December 19, 2019)

⁹ Anonymous Student Feedback: Moving Away From Abusive Comments, *Academia*, academia.stackexchange.com/questions/49902/anonymous-student-feedback-moving-forward-from-abusive-comments (accessed on December 20, 2019)

ability to think, in view of the request, I prepared two model answers (one for Low Order Thinking Skills question and another for High Order Thinking Skills question). The model answers were, then, uploaded in Moodle/TiMes.

2.3 Step-by-Step Guide

The model answers followed a step-by-step guide in accordance to the TEEE¹⁰ format. This format helps the students to see clearly how the main idea in a topic sentence is expanded with supporting explanation and examples in a paragraph. In order to ensure that the students with low English proficiency understood this, the key ideas in each sentence was highlighted and explained.

2.4 Group discussion incorporated with Peer Feedback

Group discussion is essential as it helps to enhance students' understanding of a topic or lesson.¹¹ A group discussion which incorporates peer feedback is even more powerful as a tool¹² to help students with low English proficiency in their learning. It improves their learning by building their capacity for judgment such as detecting errors and providing suggestions for improvement to their peer's response.¹³

In order to foster cognitive thinking among students with low English proficiency, I decided to utilise more lessons in class for group discussion which incorporated peer feedback. I employed the '*think-pair-share*' method from Kagan's Cooperative Learning.¹⁴ I discovered that this method worked well with the students, especially those with low English proficiency. The '*think-pair-share*' method allowed the students to think independently. More significantly, this method drew out the potential in the students who lacked the confidence in expressing and sharing their ideas. Working with a 'paired partner' was less intimidating for them to share their ideas. The good thing about this method was that whatever pre-conceived error that the students have, it would have been 'ironed out' during the 'paired discussion'. Subsequently, this gave the students more confidence in sharing their ideas and opinions with the whole class.

In addition, the class was encouraged to give feedback to their peers who shared their ideas. As a teacher, I needed to facilitate the class discussion. For instance, I have to constantly prompt the students who were sharing, with questions that will lead them to more engagement in critical thinking. Furthermore, I needed to monitor the feedback given by the students. Example, I have to constantly remind the students that the class discussion is a reciprocal learning process which required constructive feedback.

¹⁰ TEEE stands for topic sentence, explanation, example and elaboration.

¹¹ *The importance of Group Discussion*, Study and Exam, dexam.com/importance-of-study-discussion.html (accessed on December 12, 2019)

¹² R. Alrulbail, Power of Peer Feedback, *Edutopia*, <https://www.edutopia.org/discussion/power-peer-feedback> (accessed on December 11, 2019)

¹³ *Peer Feedback*, Australian Institute For Teaching & School Leadership, https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/feedback/aitsl-peer-feedback-strategy.pdf?sfvrsn=372dec3c_2 (accessed on December 11, 2019)

¹⁴ S. Kagan, *The 'E' of PIES*, Kagan, https://www.kaganonline.com/free_articles/dr_spencer_kagan/264/The-quot-E-quot-of-PIES_ (accessed on December 11, 2019)

2.5 Safe Haven in the classroom

As a teacher, I have to ensure that the classroom is a safe haven for the students to engage in discussion and sharing. I realized that one of the ways for the students with low English proficiency to learn is to give them the confidence of being able to express their ideas without the fear of being ridiculed. They must feel empowered to share their voices.¹⁵

In order to achieve this, I made a conscious effort to listen carefully to their ideas and opinions. I have to keep an 'open mind' whenever a student shared his or her idea especially when the student's idea did not align with the expected answer. In such situation, I have to inquire more to understand why the students thought that way. Thereafter, I thanked the student for volunteering to answer. In addition, I praised the student's effort in attempting to answer the question. Example of a statement I have used, 'Good thinking (followed by student's name), I have never thought of it that way'. I discovered that such praise statement helped boost the confidence of the students and propelled the more timid students such as those with low English proficiency to engage in discussion. Praise has the power to change student's behavior and improve academic performance.¹⁶

2.6 Peer Assisted Learning

Peer Assisted Learning has proven to be effective in improving the academic performance of students.¹⁷ In a private and less intimidating atmosphere, students are able to ask question freely.¹⁸ The discourse between the peers promotes active learning. It deepens the students' understanding of the lesson¹⁹ and application skills.²⁰ Consequently, this will heightened the motivation level of the students.²¹

My students were encouraged to form a 'learning support group'.²² They were given the liberty to choose their group members. I feel that this is significant as it would allow the students to freely share their ideas and seek help as they would be more comfortable in their own selected group.

It was interesting to see how quickly a strong peer network (learning support group) that this selected class has established. The students who were stronger in their academic performance was observed to be very generous with their time in coaching the weaker students, particularly those with low English proficiency.

¹⁵ S. Arnold, *12 Ways to Create a Safe and Effective Space for Student Learning*, Brave in the Attempt, braveintheattempt.com/2018/02/17/12-ways-to-create-a-safe-and-effective-space-for-student-learning/ (accessed on December 10, 2019)

¹⁶ Akin-Little, et al, Extrinsic Reinforcement in the classroom: Bribery or Best Practice, *School Psychology Review*, 33, 344-362 (accessed on December 19, 2019)

¹⁷ R. Dragan, The Benefits of Peer Assisted Learning, *Learnium*, <https://www.learnium.com/2018/05/16/the-benefits-of-peer-assisted-learning/> (accessed on December 12, 2019)

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ S. Briggs, *How Peer Teaching Improves Student Learning and 10 Ways to Encourage it*, <https://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/peer-teaching/> (accessed on December 12, 2019)

²⁰ Tobin & Golden, Peer Assisted Learning: Unexpected Benefit For All Stakeholders- Students, Peer Leaders and Faculty, 16 Fall 2015, *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1128&context=tlthe> (accessed on December 12, 2019)

²¹ K. Arrand, et al., Peer Tutoring, *Journal of Pedagogic Development*, <https://www.beds.ac.uk/jpd/volume-4-issue-1/peer-tutoring/> (accessed on December 13, 2019)

²² The group ranged from 3 to 5 students.

3.0 CONCLUSION

Contrary to research which have shown that low English proficiency have hindered students' generic skills development²³, my experience with this group of students have proven otherwise.

It was observed that the strategies employed have successfully fostered cognitive thinking in this selected class with low English proficiency. This was evident in the improvement in their academic performance. In the school-based assessments, the percentage of 'A's improved from a '0' to a '38.5%' between the first and last semester. It is interesting to note that among the 'A's', most of them were those who were initially identified as having low English proficiency. Similarly, the percentage of passes in this class observed an improvement from '73.3%' to '100%' between the first and last semester.

I hope that the strategies I have shared above will be useful for educators especially in supporting students with low English proficiency to acquire the cognitive skills necessary in the 21st century.

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²³ McLean, M., et al, Poor English Language proficiency hinders generic skills development: a qualitative study of the perspectives of first year medical student, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol. 37, 2013, Issue 4 (accessed on December 26, 2019).

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