

Influence of Small Group Discussion on the English Oral Communication Self-Efficacy of Filipino ESL Learners in Central Luzon

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Abstract

Attitudes toward a learning task deals with one's reaction to anything associated with the immediate context in which the language learning takes place. As such, the construct of self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's capabilities to carry out, organize and perform a task successfully, have always been underscored in the academic setting. Using a quasi-experimental, non-probability sampling method that included 30 senior high school students from a public secondary Science school in Central Luzon, the study examines the influence of small group discussion method on the students' English oral communication self-efficacy. Student satisfaction on EFL speaking classes questionnaire developed by Asakereh and Dehghannezhad (2015) was used to determine participants' self-efficacy. Results of the paired-sample t-test on English oral communication self-efficacy showed that the mean score after the small group discussion intervention ($\bar{x}=3.605$, $SD=.356$) is statistically equal to the mean score before intervention ($\bar{x}=3.463$, $SD=.398$, $t_{(29)}=-1.273$, $p>.05$), indicating that the intervention used did not statistically increase English communication oral self-efficacy.

Keywords: English, oral communication, self-efficacy, small-group discussion

Introduction

Background and Related Studies

Self-efficacy has always been stressed in the academe. It refers to the beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations. The higher the level of self-efficacy, the more willing a person is to try, exert more effort and persist to complete a task vis-à-vis the obstacles and adverse experience one encounters (Bandura, 1993). Self-efficacy can be enhanced through mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and physiological and emotional status of a person (Bandura, 1993; Woolfolk, Winne, & Perry, 2003).

Research from various academic areas have presented that students' self-efficacy affect their academic attitude and performance toward the subject (Ayoobiyan & Soleimani, 2015). For Ersanli (2015), researchers like Pajares (1996), Jackson (2002), Ching (2002), Margolis and McCabe (2003) concur with the contention that a person who rates himself capable on a specific task will engage more than when he does not consider himself competent enough. Likewise, Komarraju and Nadler (2013) posit that self-efficacy engenders a person with the potency to facilitate self-discipline and self-regulation of his behavior, more focus, effort and persistence, resulting in better academic achievement.

In the Philippines, Torres and Alieto (2019a) did one of the most recent studies on the relationship between English self-efficacy and learning. Using the researcher made English Self-Efficacy Scale inspired by the English self-efficacy scales of Clement and Kruidenier (1983), Clement et.al (1994) and Ely (1986) administered in the foreign settings, they reported the levels of English self-efficacy of 160 Grade 12 senior high school students in a city in Nueva Ecija. They found that of the 20 items related to English self-efficacy, delivering solo performances like oration and declamation and some modes of public speaking got the lowest mean score. Their study presented a challenge among ESL teachers and curriculum planners on how to come up with pedagogical programs, both in the micro and the macro-levels, that will be responsive to students' levels of English self-efficacy.

Of the four communication skills writing, reading, listening and speaking, speaking is intuitively the most important. Rivers (1981) argues further that people use speaking more than reading and writing in communication. Pica (1987) contends that language is best learned in the context of extended meaning communication of which speaking is rich in. The lack of speaking abilities is a hindrance for a student to share what he knows with a teacher or engage in social conversations, thus a feeling of low oral self-efficacy and a stumbling block to the social development of the student (Weiss, 2004).

The small group discussion method involves a series of meetings between the teacher and students or amongst students under the direction and guidance of a teacher that allows for free exchange of ideas on a particular topic (Garcia, 1989). The small group discussion method when conducted prudently allows for actual experience of speaking, vicarious experience of observing a group mate and boosts one's perception of one's ability. Hence, the small group discussion method/approach where English is used as a medium of communication/discussion may be a vehicle to improve one's oral English self-efficacy.

Though there is a study in the Philippine setting that examined Filipino ESL learners' English self-efficacy (e.g., Torres & Alieto, 2019a), still there is no specific study to date or to the researchers' knowledge that specifically endeavored on English oral communication self-efficacy in particular. Further, the researchers would want to validate the potency of the small group discussion technique in enhancing Filipino ESL learners' English Oral communication self efficacy. Hence, the present study.

Research Questions

1. How may the participants' English oral communication self-efficacy be described before and after the intervention?
2. Is there a significant difference on the participants' English oral communication self-efficacy before and after the intervention?

Methodology

Research Design

The present study follows a quasi-experimental, purposive non-probability sampling, design and method. Since the study makes no attempt to generalize its findings to a larger population due to its parochial nature, the purposive sampling method of research had been perceived to be the most appropriate.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was done in a public secondary science high school in a city in Central Luzon. The researchers chose this setting guided by the idea that Science High Schools in the Philippines are conceived as special schools being the home to intellectually promising students skilled on problem-solving and and equipped with critical thinking. Participants were 30 senior high school students during the Academic Year 2019-2020. The study was conducted from October to November 2019.

Research Instruments

The researchers adopted the 30-item English Oral Communication Self-Efficacy questionnaire developed by Asakereh and Dehghanzad's (2015) and administered in EFL setting. The participants were asked to encircle their choice of preference from a Likert-patterned continuum. The continuum runs from a five-point continuum from "absolutely agree" to "absolutely not agree" numerically weighted from "one to five" of which "one" represents the highest degree in the continuum or "absolutely agree" and "five" represents the lowest degree in the continuum or "absolutely not

agree”.

Data Gathering

Prior to the start of the study, a letter to conduct the experiment was personally delivered to the school principal. Subsequent approval led the researchers to secure the permission from the parents since all the student-participants were minors during the conduct of the study. A co-operative teacher was chosen to administer the study. All the students were asked to answer the questionnaire adopted from the study of Asakereh and Dehghannezhad (2015) prior to the intervention (i.e., pre-intervention English oral communication self-efficacy).

The Co-operative teacher prepared five lesson plans executed during five classroom meetings. The co-operative teacher randomly divided the whole class into groups with five members each. Each group was given the topics embodied in the series of five lesson plans for each classroom meeting. A total of five classroom meetings were used for the study with the groupings randomly changed for the duration of the five series. The small group discussion technique was the intervention adopted for use of all the groups. After the five oral discussions, the participants then answered the same English oral communication self-efficacy questionnaire they had previously accomplished to determine their post-intervention English oral communication self-efficacy.

Analysis of Data

Descriptive statistics such as mean, frequency, percentage and standard deviation were used to describe the participants' English oral communication self-efficacy. Paired sample t-test was used to determine the changes in the participants' self-efficacy before and after the intervention.

Results and Discussion

The presentation and discussion of results begins with the description of the participants' English oral communication self-efficacy before (3.1) and after (3.2) the intervention. This is followed by the presentation of results on the difference between the participants' pre and post-intervention levels of English oral communication self-efficacy and skills (3.3).

Pre-intervention English oral communication self-efficacy

Data shows that out of the 30 items purported to measure the level of oral English self-efficacy, 14 participants ranked themselves efficacious to highly efficacious (3.5 up in the Likert-scale measurement) while 11 participants ranked themselves neutral to efficacious. Only five participants ranked themselves low in self-efficacy and none from the participants considered themselves to have for extremely low efficacy. A cursive look at the data shows that roughly half (46.66%) of the participants rated themselves quite high in their English oral communication self-efficacy while more than one-fourth (36.66%) settled for the middle ground, perceived to be undecided and a very low percentage ranked themselves to have low self-efficacy.

The relatively high English oral communication self-efficacy scores can be attributed to the fact the participants come from a Science High School as opposed to a regular high school in the Philippines. The Department of Education of the Philippines through DepEd Order 69 mandates the creation of Science High Schools that imposes more stringent entrance examinations for intellectually promising students with emphasis on problem-solving and critical thinking. Students of science high schools take pride in being in such premiere institution and believe more in their abilities over students of regular high schools. Such scenario is akin to the pride and beliefs of students of private schools vis-à-vis their public school counterparts, in the Philippine context. For Torres and Alieto (2019b), students in premiere institutions in the Philippines, such as Science high schools, exclusive schools and private schools (Cruz, 2014), have more access to intensive English training and exposure.

Worth highlighting are the items in the questionnaire with the highest scores. Close to highly efficacious items were: “I am sure that if I practice speaking more, I will get better grades in the course ($\bar{x} = 4.4$)” as well as two others: “I can introduce my teacher to someone else in English ($\bar{x} = 4.06$)” and “I can introduce myself in English ($\bar{x} = 4.33$)”. The participants' high score on practice speaking is coherent with the findings of Egan (1999) who posits that opportunities for practice speaking builds one's self-efficacy. The high scores obtained by “introducing one's self and that of one's teacher” is congruent with the effect of practice. Man as a social being, interacts with others and it is fundamental that in interaction, one introduces one's self, the repeated introduction of which evokes practice-speaking that leads to building of one's self-efficacy. Knowledge of a topic, especially topical knowledge is knowledge structures

in long-term memory (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) impacts one's speaking efficacy. It posits that knowledge is needed to speak about a topic which is coherent to the need for real knowledge for self-efficacy (Rush, 2016). The study participants have knowledge of themselves and the people they are always with (their teachers) such that the two items of high scores in this study were expected.

On the other hand, the two items in the questionnaire with the lowest average scores are: "I can speak better than my classmates" and "I am one of the best students in speaking courses". The two items seem to show the respondents' dislike for comparison and superlatives in assessing their English oral communication self-efficacy. The researchers surmise that the respondents belonging to the same Science High would have the tendency to view themselves as relatively equal in intellect and capability that they desist from making comparisons, much more, feeling having the most capability in oral English speaking to the point of being branded as overly confident.

Post-intervention English oral communication self-efficacy

Data on participants' post-intervention English oral communication self-efficacy show that out of the 30 items purported to measure the level of English oral communication self-efficacy, 17 participants perceived themselves efficacious to highly efficacious (3.5 up in the Likert-scale measurement), while 10 participants considered themselves neutral to efficacious and only three participants perceived themselves low in self-efficacy. None from among the participants considered themselves to have extremely low self-efficacy. A cursive look at the data shows that more than half (56.66%) of the participants rated themselves quite high in their oral English self-efficacy while more than one-fourth (33.33%) settled for the middle ground, perceived to be undecided and a very low percentage ranked themselves low in efficacy

Comparison between participants' pre and post intervention English oral communication self-efficacy

A paired sample t-test was computed using SPSS to determine whether the pre and post intervention mean scores of the participants' English oral communication self-efficacy is significantly different from each other. The results show that the mean scores after intervention ($\bar{x} = 3.605$, $SD = .356$) is statistically equal to the mean scores before intervention ($\bar{x} = 3.463$, $SD = .398$), $t_{(29)} = -1.273$, $p > .05$. It implies that the administration of the small group discussion did not statistically affect the participants' perception of their oral/ speaking English self-efficacy.

The small group discussion method adopts a face-to-face free exchange of ideas within groupings of five persons (Garcia, 1989) giving more equal opportunities for group mates to quality communication (Lowry et al., 2006). It can be deduced that small group discussion engenders oral interaction and is a method of increasing opportunities and the frequency for speaking which Misliyah (2006) posits increases the eagerness and confidence of a person to express thoughts orally. The present study, however, is non-congruent to the studies of Misliya (2006) and Gufron (2002). The statistical non-significant influence of small group discussion to participants' English oral communication self-efficacy is ascribed to several factors.

Self-efficacy is affected by the emotional reactions and self-evaluations that leads to under or over-estimation of one's real abilities (Bandura, 1986; Hackett & Betz, 1989). The researchers surmise that the respondents have over-estimated their self-efficacy ratings during the pre-test grounded on the Filipino culture of "*amor propio*". "*Amor Propio*" evokes self-love which develops a person's strongly wish to be recognized and be valued (Andres, 1996), thus prompts the participants to rate themselves high in their English oral communication self-efficacy with the aim to distinguish themselves from students of a regular high school in the Philippines. The latter is in consonance with the findings of Jin and Lin (2018). "*Amor Propio*" speaks of hypocrisy (Carson-Arenas, 2004) where one tries to hide one's inadequacies by pretension that one may not be looked down upon. The relatively high pre-test English oral communication self-efficacy scores would result in a small space for gains in the average scores for the post-test English oral communication self-efficacy test, thus no statistical difference between the two.

The findings of the study of Lee (2009) show that students' participation in small group discussions varies greatly among group mates. One's inability to speak fluidly is perceived by repeated failures that results in avoidance while being laugh upon in lieu of mistakes is perceived as vicarious experiences by group mates that results in inhibition (Bandura, 1977). Zhang et al (2012) contends that small group discussion offers fewer opportunities to disengage mentally from the discussion compared to big classes. The present study wanted to remove all plausible variables that could disengage mentally the respondents, but having to accomplish the post-test English oral communication self-efficacy questionnaire leading to the participants' feasibility study defenses constituted mental disengagement that was

beyond the researchers' control. The situation constituted a distraction that could influence the post-test results. The thought of having to prepare for the feasibility study defenses imposes a lot of stress and emotional strain on the respondents undergirds the fourth source of self-efficacy which anchors its wisdom on the physiological and emotional state of the person (Bandura 1995). The emotional stress and physiological strain of the participants at the time of accomplishing the post-test questionnaire may have taken its toll on the respondents.

The researchers may have likewise made an error in allowing certain degrees of accepting some infusion of the vernacular during the small group discussions that might have had a dent in the results for English oral communication self-efficacy. The decision to accept such circumstances was made by the researchers following Ur's (1996) observation to compensate for the fear of making mistakes on the part of the participants as well as to encourage a more relaxed milieu which likewise adds to probable increase in self-efficacy.

The disparity or non-congruence of the descriptive data showing the administration of small group discussion having a positive impact on oral English self-efficacy (post test \bar{x} of 3.605 > pre test \bar{x} of 3.463) and the statistical insignificance of the paired sample t-test can lead to probable inferences. It can be inferred that the small group discussion may have had an impact in increasing the oral-self-efficacy of the respondents. It may be induced that additional time per session and increase in the number of sessions (Lee, 2009) for small group discussion as well as carefully designing the topics for future small group discussions may well contribute to the oral English self-efficacy of the students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The small group discussion method is a potent method in fostering interactive communication amongst students. When done properly i.e. topics are carefully designed (Morita 2000), it brings forth different knowledge, experiences and talents that are shared and built upon by the participants in a relaxed learning environment where passiveness is turned to activeness.

Results may provide insights among language educators as regards the amount of teaching that has to be done to ensure the mastery of the oral communication skills. Since self-efficacy is one of the most vital factors for learning, it is essential for teachers to include principles of learning and psychology in their respective practices. Teachers may acknowledge the fact that learners who have repeated experience success have higher self-efficacy than those students who experience repeated failures in class. Thus, giving an array of experiences and building positive beliefs in students is essential for them to develop their sense of self-efficacy. On the part of the learners, there is a necessity for them to have full awareness of their English oral communication skills for it will help them determine what are their strengths as well as the aspects they need to enhance to better perform in the subject (Torres & Alieto, 2019a).

Future studies could replicate this study with a larger number of participant as well as larger number of classes and participating schools to cover a wider area or district. The small number of participants may limit the findings' certainty and applicability. It is also suggested that the context of future similar studies be broaden as to incorporate the variables of gender, socio-economic status, difference in grade levels, difference in type of school i.e. a comparative study between public, private and regular (not science high school) schools, etc. to correspond to maximum variations. The length of time poses another limitation of the study. As it was only confined to five series of sessions of an hour to an hour and half each, the initial positive, neutral or negative findings cannot be sustained or ascertained with high degrees of accurateness. Future studies are suggested to increase the number of times with the small group discussions and provide for a longitudinal study, if possible. It is likewise recommended that more topics which are of students' interests and within their circumference of knowledge be adopted for the future studies.

The small group discussion method used in this study is the opinion exchange technique. Future studies may want to delve with the other techniques of small group discussion such as games, role-play, drama, projects and interview and their effect on English oral communication self-efficacy of students. The present study unravels the needs of the students for more varieties in teaching procedures so as to harness the creativities and thinking skills of the students, promote activity-oriented opportunities that could accord oral communicative practice, greater verbal interaction, expression, explaining and experiences to the students that could enhance their oral self-efficacy.

Likewise, it is recommended that with the increase in the number of sessions of the small group discussion method, encouraging the students to fear not speaking in English such as inculcating in the students that mistakes is committed by everyone and that "lathophobic asphasia", which is the fear of committing mistakes in speaking in English, can be conquered by practice. Praising and rewarding even little positive efforts to develop the students' self-efficacy

must be incorporated into the speaking/ oral curriculum, especially in English classes. The researchers strongly suggest the integration of more oral English activities into the curriculum of basic education. Lastly, qualitative researches on small group discussion methods with its different techniques deserves to be undertaken to get a clearer perception of the experiences of students with small group discussion vis-à-vis self-efficacy, academic performances, motivation, internal-external locus of control among others.

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