



PRIMARY RESEARCH

The effectiveness of mass lecture in learning English language skills

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Abstract. The current study is an explanatory study that investigates the students' perceptions of the effects of the mass lecture on learning four basic English language skills. The objectives of this study are i) is mass lecture suitable to be conducted to learn English language and ii) what are the suitable language skills to be learned in a mass lecture setting. A quantitative study was carried out, and the participants were 206 ESL students from one of the northern universities in Malaysia. It has been found that speaking skill receives negative feedback as to be learned in mass lecture setting whereas the other skills receive a positive one from the students. Factors like difficulties in getting feedback and attention from language instructors might be why students do not positively accept speaking. The result indicates that a mass lecture setting is suitable to be conducted in learning the English language. However, there is a limitation in which mass lecture setting is not suitable for learning speaking skills.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

English language has been declared as the second language in Malaysia. The act is significant in making English as the compulsory subject in the Malaysian education curriculum. With the importance of inculcating and incorporating English language in both studies and daily life, there are also several 'hiccups' occurred while executing the plan. Though English language portrays enormous magnitude in life, there are still some issues emerge during the process of learning it particularly at tertiary level (Tran *et al.*, 2012). One of them is the shortage of manpower or English language teachers and lecturers in Malaysia. Thus, one of the solutions to this particular problem is by using mass lecture in teaching English. With regards to the Malaysian university context, the relevance of implementing mass lecture in English language learning has become the major subject of continuing interests in these days. With the increasing number of students' enrolment in the local universities, there is no doubt that most universities are having such concerns on the issue of manpower shortage to educate these students.

With the execution of mass lecture setting in some universities, the matter is still frowned upon with the invitation of a few more challenges in English language learning. The emergence can be seen in applying it to students of heterogeneous group with different backgrounds and language proficiency levels. With the four basic skills of language – listening, reading, speaking, writing – to be covered, the main concern has been parked on whether

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these skills are suitable to be taught or learned by using the mass lecture setting. The concerns are also derived from several more issues such as attention to each student, feedbacks as well as the setting of mass lecture itself. This expository study thus aimed to investigate the students' perceptions on the use of mass lecture setting towards the language learning skills among second language learners in one of the public universities in Malaysia. The research questions for this study are:

- 1) Is mass lecture suitable to be conducted to learn English language?
- 2) What are the suitable language skills to be learnt in a mass lecture setting?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, countless researches and studies have suggested numerous teaching pedagogies that claimed to be the best to educators as well as learners in acquiring the "four skills" – listening, speaking, reading and writing. It has been instinctively nurtured that these skills are undeniably vital to be successful in learning a language specifically English. Even though each skill is perceived distinctively in terms of its characteristic and uniqueness, all skills have always been integrated in a language class as to ensure that learners would have greater opportunities to shine in diverse meaningful tasks (Ellis, 2008).

In addition, the number of students in a particular class also has a great effect on how much students gain and learn. Class size plays a huge role in determining the students' level of engagement between the teacher and among students, the attention or focus given from teachers to an individual student or students as a whole, and the allocation of time and material needed in teaching (Ehrenberg *et al.*, 2001). A detailed student survey was done by National Union of Students (NUS) during 2008 until 2011 to investigate their perceptions on a high quality learning experience. Based on the survey, it is discovered that one of three important criteria is the size of the class. The survey also revealed that students suggested several recommendations to improve the quality of teaching and learning which included the involvement of more interactive group sessions and one-to-one teaching sessions. It can be concluded that the relationship between teacher and student as well as peer interaction in a class foster positive learning outcomes. Graham (2010) also claims that contact time plays a huge part in student learning than the time that the students experience. Undoubtedly, a positive and encouraging classroom environment will surely convey clear and comprehensible instructions between teachers and learners. Nevertheless, issues pertaining classroom environment have become the circumstances that cannot be avoided. One of the issues is to teach in an immense size of learning environment or mass lecture.

Mass lecture as described as Marris is "the most universal and yet apparently the most impersonal" teaching method (as cited by Startup, 1997, 45). As suggested by the name itself, the word *mass* indicates that students are taught in a large class whereas the word *lecture*, upholds the traditional way of teaching where one-way delivery of knowledge is transferred from educators to students.

Since it is a traditional instructional method of teaching where one way of communication is the focus, it has received a lot of criticisms due to its limitations and weaknesses. Hattie (2005) discovers that there is a lack of concentration on tasks where most of the times, students would interact with each other and the teachers' opportunities to observe the students' behaviors become very limited. Todd *et al.* (2000) conclude in their study that students learn more when they are in smaller classroom setting in contrast to large classroom setting which can be damaging to the students in long term. In addition, in 2010, Akbari *et al.* (2010) claim that mass lecture limits personal connections between students and educators as an educator is accountable to a large number of students. The absence of

rapport, positive and close relationship bind between learners and educators could result in an unenjoyable learning experience (Krause et al. 2006).

Evans and Christopher (2007) carried out a research study among first-year students in Hong Kong. The results of the study disclosed that students faced some problems in learning subjects that used English as the medium of instruction. The research study revealed that some of the challenges were due to academic speaking and academic writing (see Hyland's, 1997). Evans and Bruce (2011) further investigated a study related to challenges faced by first year undergraduates in Hong Kong who had to meet the demand of using English. The qualitative research study discovered that one of four difficulties that they have to deal with is the ability to understand lectures. Kim (2006) explored a study related to difficulties which East Asian international students had to face in terms of academic listening and speaking skill. The findings of the study is similar to the earlier findings found by Ferris (1998) that discussing in class and engaging in whole-class debates were what worried them the most. Coetzee *et al.* (2008) discusses several problems which may arise due to learning in a large class size. Some of the problems are less chances of interactions among students and lack of individual attention given to an individual student.

Though there are several disagreements of employing mass lecture as a teaching method, studies have shown that mass lecture does affect students' learning positively. Chanock (1999) finds out that lecturing is perceived as an efficient way to deliver knowledge to a massive number of students especially in listening skill. Kryder (2002) discovers that more than 80% of learners in a mass lecture course prefer the method of learning in a large scale which produces similar quality to those who learnt in a smaller class. Tanner and Deborah (2006) claim that paying attention to each student and promoting active learning in a class do not significantly develop students learning cognitively. A study developed by Hoxby (2000) and Milesi and Adam (2006) reveal that there is no significant relationship between smaller size class and student achievement. The latter research concluded that smaller class size does not affect students' performances in a class. Bligh (2000) completed a study on the function of lecture and he discovered that lecture is "as effective as other methods for transmitting information. Light *et al.* (2001) further claim that in terms of learning and teaching in higher education setting, the content of a lecture is somehow insignificant in mass lecture. They pointed out that what is more important is the interaction of students in learning a specific subject. The findings reveal that learning in a mass lecture setting does not necessarily foster inactive or ineffective learning outcomes. The most important key to student learning is on how the lecturer can meet the needs of the students in which the best out of them could be developed and expanded within the mass lecture setting.

Despite numerous positive as well as negative criticisms regarding the usage of mass lecture as an educational setting in promoting teacher-student relationship and boosting students' success, there are not enough studies in terms of its practice in learning language skills. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the effectiveness of mass lecture in learning English language skills which are reading, listening, speaking and writing.

METHODOLOGY

Respondents

The respondents of this study are 206 ESL tertiary-level learners who enrolled in mass lecture English classes in one of the public universities in Malaysia. They were a mixture of semester one, two and three from various faculties such as Faculty of Accountancy, Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Science and Faculty of Applied Science. As part of the syl-

labus, they learned four important skills in English namely speaking, listening, reading and writing during English classes. It is compulsory for all the learners to enroll in the English classes for the first three semesters in order to fulfill the university course requirement.

Instrument/Data Analysis

A quantitative method was employed in order to acquire an insight into the learners' views whether a mass lecture setting is suitable for learning and also to know their views on which of the four skills in English mentioned above is suitable to be learned in a mass lecture setting. The instrument used to collect the data was a questionnaire. Reliability checked was done and the result of the cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire used for this exploratory study is 0.779 which is the internal consistency is acceptable.

The questionnaire consists of two different sections which are; Section A for Personal details and Section B for the effectiveness of mass lecture items. Respondents were required to answer 11 items regarding their feelings about mass lecture setting and learning English using that setting. Five Likert Scales from 'Strongly disagree' (1), 'Disagree' (2), 'Uncertain' (3), 'Agree' (4) and 'Strongly Agree' (5). The data in this study is analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software version 20.0 for percentages, mean values and standard deviations.

FINDINGS

TABLE 1 . The suitability of conducting mass lecture setting

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	142	68.9
	No	64	31.1
	Total	206	100.0

From the questionnaire, students were asked whether mass lecture setting is suitable to be conducted to learn English language skills. Based on Table 1, it is discovered that a percentage of 68.9% ESL students agreed that mass lecture setting is suitable to be conducted in learning English language skills while 31.1% of them disagreed.

TABLE 2 . The reasons for suitability of mass lecture setting for learning

No	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	The place used for mass lecture is suitable.	3.73	.979
2.	The lesson is conducted very clearly.	3.71	.840
3.	I get enough attention during mass lecture.	3.27	.955
8.	I received feedback on my assignments on time.	3.66	.874
9.	I am comfortable learning in mass lecture setting.	3.48	1.142
10.	ELC/BEL codes are suitable to be conducted using mass lecture setting.	3.38	1.069

Based on Table 2, majority of the ESL learners in this exploratory study believed that mass lecture classes that they have attended throughout 14 weeks of the semester are suitable for the English subjects that they enrolled in ($M=3.38$). Among the reasons why the learners feel that mass lecture setting is workable for learning because the place used is suitable for mass lecture ($M=3.73$), the lesson was conducted and delivered very clearly by the instructor ($M=3.71$) as well as feedbacks from the instructor were received on time ($M=3.66$). Apart from that, the learners feel comfortable learning in mass lecture setting

($M=3.48$) because they get enough attention from the instructor ($M=3.27$). However, when it comes to learning the four important skills in English, namely; listening, speaking, reading and writing, the learners feel that there was limitation in learning some of the skills in mass lecture setting.

TABLE 3 . The suitability of learning English skills in mass lecture setting

No	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
5.	I am able to understand the listening component well.	3.69	.860
6.	I am able to understand the speaking component well.	2.78	.952
7.	I am able to understand writing component well.	3.62	.779
8.	I am able to understand reading component well.	3.85	.704

From the findings in Table 3, it is found that majority of the learners believed that out of the four skills, they can understand reading component well when learning in mass lecture setting ($M=3.85$) followed by listening ($M=3.69$) and writing ($M=3.62$). Whereby, for speaking, only a few of them were able to understand the component when learning that skill in mass lecture class ($M=2.78$). These findings will further discuss in the discussion section.

DISCUSSION

This research study seeks to explore whether mass lecture is suitable to be conducted and to find out the suitable skills to be learnt in a mass lecture setting. Based on this present study, it can be concluded that the students believe that mass lecture is appropriate to be conducted in learning English language skill. They agree that mass lecture is carried out in a convenient venue, attention and feedback is sufficient and satisfactory, and the learning environment is comfortable and encouraging. The finding of this paper proves the studies done by previous researches (Bligh, 2000; Light *et al.*, 2001; Kryder, 2000) in which learning in a mass lecture educational setting is not a problem to students. Even though learning is done in a large class where an educator is accountable to many students, learning is possible if students are offered with adequate responses in a positive learning environment. It also indicates that though mass lecture has the potential to affect how much students' gain in the learning process, teachers or educators serve bigger responsibilities where they are the information givers and the facilitators who are responsible of shaping the classroom for optimum learning.

The results of this study also shows the students opinions on language skills that they believe could be learnt in a mass lecture setting. Based on the findings, reading, listening and writing could be learnt in a mass lecture setting. It is revealed that speaking skill on the other hand, receive negative responses to be learnt. The result is paralleled with the previous studies (Ferris, 1998; Kim, 2006; Coetzee *et al.*, 2008) which found out that speaking skill is intimidating to the students especially when it involves discussions and participations. The effects are viewed as accumulation of frustration whenever they could not find the correct words to utter. Therefore, no doubt that speaking in front of others requires a large amount of confidence where students need to be mentally prepared to become vulnerable in front of others especially when they possess low proficiency in the language. Thus, involving in activities as such has become a painful experience especially when they are not given enough time to prepare themselves which later deteriorating their self-confidence. When speaking is incomprehensible for lecturers and peers, students become easily frustrated since the message is not successfully transacted (Na, 2007).

The results also prove a research that was previously done by Chanock (1999) which claimed that delivering knowledge is best done in a lecture. Reading and listening skills are perceived to be effectively learnt in a mass class as both skills offer language input and are usually considered as passive skills (Al-Jawi, 2010) as learners only need to listen and understand when they receive and decode the messages (Sheri, 2012). Though lectures are claimed to instill 'passive' attitude in learning (Charlton, 2006), teaching in a mass lecture setting does not mean that active learning cannot be inculcated among students (McKinney, 2011).

To compare between speaking and writing skill, Al-Jawi (2010) also outlined the differences between speaking and writing skill. Speaking skill deals with paralinguistic features and extralinguistic features which could be daunting to students compared to writing skill which deals with words and punctuations on a piece of paper. In fact, learners have to listen, think and speak which occur at the same time. In contrast, learners could spend some time to compose and re-read what is written. These dissimilarities might be the reasons why speaking skill is considered as an unsuitable language skill to be learnt in a mass lecture though both; writing and speaking skill are productive skills. A book 'Universities, the Citizen Scholar and the Future of Higher Education' written by Arvanitakis and David (2016) also clarify that lecture pedagogy may limit the chances for self-correction as feedback is given individually. Thus, it may not be able to be carried out successfully in a mass lecture setting unless it is done in a collaborative and communicative method. For learners to improve on their speaking skill, they deem to seek for feedback and responses which can increase their productivity (Moore and Susan, 2013). Nevertheless, feedback and responses that they seek for might not be able to be shared in a large class.

CONCLUSION

The issue of implementing mass lecture setting in English language learning needs to be thoroughly investigated and addressed by all responsible parties. Though the execution of it might be the answer for the occurring problems of manpower shortage, it has to be noted that combining a heterogeneous group comes with a challenge. Factors as attention, environment and feedbacks to students have to be addressed thoroughly. Researchers as well as educational practitioners all around the world have agreed that mass lecture is suitable and effective to be used with certain limitations and conditions. Among the conditions is the effectiveness of learning language skills which are reading, writing and listening. It has been found that speaking skill receives negative feedback as to be learned in mass lecture setting whereas the other skills receive a positive one from the students. Factors like difficulties in getting feedbacks and attention from language instructors might be the reasons of why speaking is not positively accepted by students. Thus, it can be concluded that mass lecture is probably a suitable platform to implement effective language learning with regards to the language skills but it comes with a certain limitations.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the execution of mass lecture setting in some universities, the matter is still frowned upon with the invitation of a few more challenges in English language learning. The emergence can be seen in applying it to students of heterogeneous group with different backgrounds and language proficiency levels.

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