

# Let's Talk and Let's Go Global: A Unique Approach in Language Learning

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## Abstract

Language learning for English, the second language in Malaysia has taken numerous transformation in order to cater to the demands of the industry which is to be proficient in English. Since the first language is Bahasa Melayu, subsequently, language of interaction is done mostly in mother tongue. Therefore, it proves to be quite challenging for non-native English learners to practice the second language in the local environment. In order to improve the current English language learning especially starting from school, incorporating modern language teaching and learning tools and reducing class sizes to smaller classes are essential for teachers to have more quality instructional time and students to fully benefit from language learning process. The unique factors of language learning practice in any setting are based on authentic value, interactive, challenging factor that allows growth in language acquisition and at the same time adding significance to language learning as it uses familiar medium. Social interaction and communicative approach using the target language are also vital to the progress of an individual language learner in improving his or her proficiency level. Major benefits can be seen as the result from reductions in class size to 20 pupils to one teacher which increases individualized attention and interactions between students and teacher in the class. The findings from Let's Talk and Let's Go Global program indicate that incorporation of social media, smaller class size and authentic communicative approach should be taken into consideration as the basis for English language learning.

**Keywords:** language learning, class size, interactions, social media, communicative approach

## 1. Introduction

Even though English language is the official second language in Malaysia, local students still face difficulties in applying the language academically and communicatively. Good command in English will guarantee good future. Students are expected to have good command of English language as they learn English for about 12 years from kindergarten to secondary school. Among the challenges set by the Ministry of Education in the National Education Blueprint 2013-2025 is to ensure that everyone receives equal opportunity for education. At the same time, it is to further enhance education excellence in order to produce the necessary human capital who are globally competitive. It is noted that every student is targeted to be proficient in both Bahasa Melayu and English language so "that upon leaving school, the student should be able to work in both Bahasa Malaysia and English language environment". As such, different approaches are required to cater this need in learning language especially in an environment where the first language is mainly used.

The strong decline in the levels of English proficiency is evidenced when local secondary school students further their study in tertiary institution (Mohan et al., 2010) and these students have been discovered to have poor communication skill. Furthermore, the "rigidity in learning styles and dependence on routines and teachers" (Wankowski, 1991) and lack of much needed exposure in attaining language skills in English language is evidenced in the poor results of the students in the English language course. Therefore, due to lack of exposure in target language, there is a need to encourage language learners to acquire communicative fluency using any available language learning strategies. In order to accomplish the stated challenges that the government is trying to address, current technology using entertainment media and social media are both efficient way to serve as a language learning platform for secondary school students. This is because the new generation students are more familiar with the modern technology to the extent that it is a vital part of their everyday life. Therefore, if this

technology can be manipulated to be one of the language learning tools, it will be more meaningful for the students as they assess the medium almost every day.

In each normal class in school, there are different levels of proficiency that categorize the students in terms of learning pace. For language learning, it is important to have fewer students so that everyone has a fair chance of language practice. Communication methods should be varied to allow the language learners to assimilate English as part of their daily encounters and to be more comfortable in using English language. Social media such as Facebook, email and Youtube.com are the more prominent medium of interaction where users can express their thoughts freely. Hence, it is essential if language learning can take place in these platforms so that students can discuss variety of topics online and in-class. To conclude, amalgamation of modern technology and having fewer students for a language learning class to promote active interaction for individual improvement in language practice may encourage secondary school students to engage more in English language communication activities.

## **2. Let's Talk and Let's Go Global Program**

There is no doubt that the command of English is becoming more crucial in the education institution. Towards the realization of National Education Blueprint 2013-2025, primary and secondary school students are required to assimilate the nation's second language, which is English language, in their learning process. In the past, the implementation of teaching of Mathematics and Science in English (ETeMS/PPSMI) and English for Science and Technology has shown favourable increment in the English proficiency level of students (The Star, 2008). Nevertheless, it was found that the students experienced anxiety in meeting the expectation of parents, teachers, school and oneself. There is still a need to increase students' motivation and interest in using English language as part of their daily interactions. Many students, especially in the rural areas still find English as one of the most difficult subjects to learn and this proves to be challenging with poor English-speaking environment available to cater to their needs. In addition, there is also difficulty in comprehending the mechanics and structure of English language which often baffled the learners (Hayden, 2008). When there is much confusion in articulating what the student wants in terms of lack of familiarity of English language usage in social interaction, it is either the message will be unclear or the students will stop using the language completely. This, in turn, leads the students to be discouraged or demotivated in learning English language.

Therefore, in the light of the pressing need to increase English proficiency level among students and to overcome the underlying factors hindering this effort, other alternatives are prerequisite to meet the demands of Ministry of Education. Let's Talk and Let's Go Global program is a 6-month English language learning program, organized by Associate Professor Dr. Noraien Mansor from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, that focuses on utilizing language learning approach that incorporates both entertainment media and social media to generate students' interest in using English language as well as to encourage the communicative outcome of these English language learners. There are 13 selected secondary schools in Terengganu with 260 Form Four students that partook this program. The driving factor of this program is to investigate whether the implementation of communicative approach and the usage of variety of familiar medium (online media and social media: Facebook, Youtube.com and films) in an English language classroom has an effect on the students' speaking performance. Thus, to increase individual attention and interaction between the students under the guidance of a teacher, smaller class size of 20 students is designed for each class (each selected school). Furthermore, another aims of this program is to gauge the perceptions of the students toward utilization of communicative approach and social media as a practice in an English language classroom.

## **3. Uniqueness: Communicative Method Using Modern Technology versus Traditional Language Classroom**

*"I hear, I forget;*

*I see, I learn;*

*I do, I understand."* by Gennady V. Oster

The above quotation defines the necessity of implementation of any acquisition of knowledge or to simplify: learning by doing. Nevertheless, the current physical structure of schools and psychological preferences of teachers are indirectly causing learning target language to be less desirable for students. Drilling techniques, rigid lessons, less student-centered environment and less target language interaction are examples of the current condition in a normal English language classroom or traditional language classroom. Language teaching in schools is often confined into single classrooms of around 40 students and this discourages the teachers in giving their full attention to each student in terms of acknowledging each student's progress in language acquisition.

Teachers tend to opt for following and completing the language syllabus than spending more time corresponding to the learners' language expectations. Students are instructed to adhere to the text books closely, thus, the sole English language interaction exist is only based on the books. In such an inflexible classroom situation, students get fewer opportunities in expressing the use of language and at times, it created rather intimidating setting for students with low English language proficiency to compete with the students with average and higher language proficiency. The important part of learning a language is to practice it and without active implementation of the target language, intended message can be distorted directly and indirectly, which caused failure in communication.

### 3.1 Class Size

In order to achieve meaningful language learning, smaller class size is pertinent to the success of learners' language acquisition. A normal secondary school classroom size in Malaysia is below 40 to 30 students. Hence, local school teachers are unable to provide sufficient attention to every student due to the ratio of class size is one teacher to 40 pupils (Bernama, 2009). In order for the students to fully benefit from the teaching and learning process of any subjects, there should be sufficient quality time for the classroom interaction especially tutorial slot to be more meaningful. There is evidence, mainly from US studies ((Wilson, 2001), as cited in Herdberg, Atputhasamy, Ai-Girl, and Lee (2005)), to demonstrate that reduction in class size linked to students' academic performance. As stated in the McKinsey Quarterly Report (2006), top performing school systems recognize that the only way to improve outcomes is to improve instructions. Learning occurs when students and teachers interact and thus to improve learning implies improving the quality of that interaction. Major benefits can be seen as the result from reductions in class size to below 20 pupils to one teacher which increases individualized attention and interactions between students and teacher in the class. Therefore, Let's Talk and Let's Go Global program adopted this method of class size reduction to cater to the targeted outcome of more significant personal and peer language learning.

### 3.2 Individual and Peer Language Learning

Freedom of expression is one of the aims of Let's Talk and Let's Go Global program. To learn language, one needs to be able to express their thoughts clearly and intelligibly. Traditional language classroom prepares good environment for group work activities, yet, less room for individual tasks. With 20 students in each class or group, language assessment can be more focused and encompass on the participation of each members, leaving none behind. Everyone will have an equal chance of communicating using English language in accordance to the given tasks. This is evidenced in the pretest and posttest conducted in Let's Talk and Let's Go Global program. Participants of the program underwent pre-test in the form of speaking task in the first meeting and later, post-test was conducted during the second last meeting. There is significant positive change in terms of individual progress in which it was found that in the pre-test, around 80% of the students experienced anxiety in fulfilling the speaking task. This caused them to falter, unable to express their ideas in the target language (content, see Figure 1) which affected their speech delivery greatly (see Graph 2). Remarkably, the result for post-test shown that around 70% of the students gained confidence throughout the 6 months English language sessions and this in turn allow them to have better articulation of their intended message (content) as well as having more positive speech delivery.

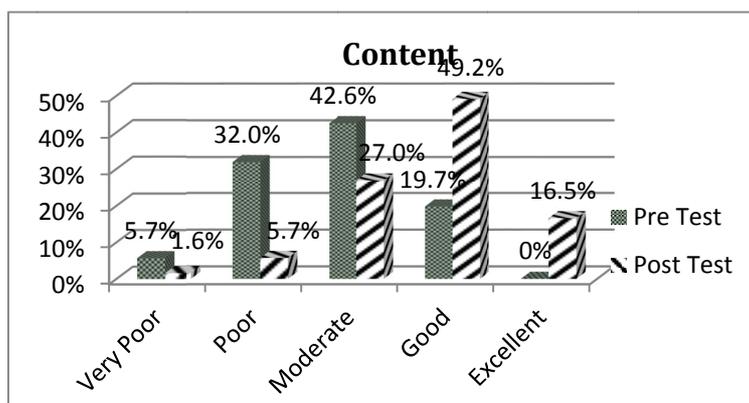


Figure 1. Component: content

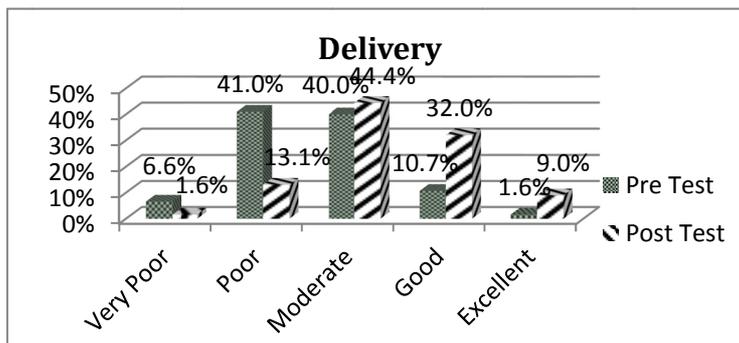


Figure 2. Component: delivery

Peer learning has been exercised most of the language session to encourage active language interaction despite the learners’ differences in terms of proficiency. According to observations and interviews conducted, students were found to be more active if there is an involvement of their friends (peers) especially in communication and interaction using English language. Thus, Let’s Talk and Let’s Go Global program prepares more conducive language learning situation for students to learn English individually and with their peers.

3.3 Language Activities: Communicative Approach (Media Interaction)

Compared to traditional language classroom, Let’s Talk and Let’s Go Global program make use of current social trend of learning through online social networking: Facebook; and online media: Youtube.com. Similar to language classroom practice, this program incorporates medium such as English films, songs and real-time chat via radio channel (Terengganu.fm) to heighten the participation of the target students based on their interests.

Facebook serves as a platform for students to express their thoughts freely and the only restriction is that they have to use English language as language of interaction in Let’s Talk and Let’s Go Global Facebook group. Since students are more familiar or at peace in interacting in virtual form, commendably, they are enthusiastic in discussing the given tasks, sharing language related media or commenting the past activities. Being one of the prominent social networking media, Facebook helps language learners to have a sense of continuous learning in their own pace compared to traditional language classroom.

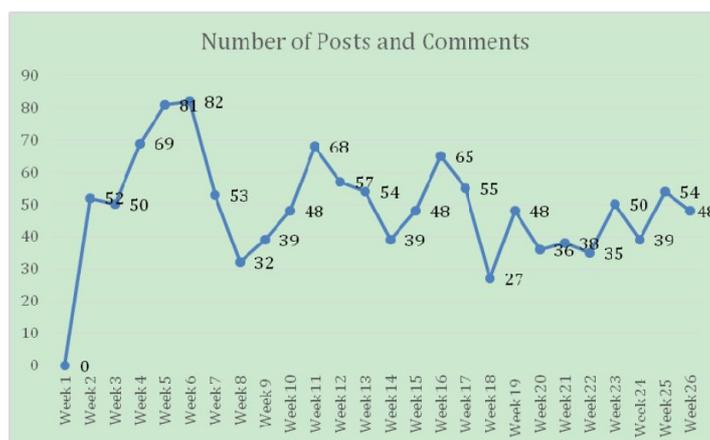


Figure 3. Frequency of posts and comments via Facebook

Films and songs in English language can be easily acquired in youtube.com. In Let’s Talk and Let’s Go Global program, most of the English activities supported the use of Youtube as part of utilizing authentic language learning tool. After displaying or playing the media during the language session, students are required to comment based on the provided instructions. Most of the students life revolve around entertainment and social media, subsequently, the language interaction and communication became more meaningful to them as they are allowed to have their say interactively.

Real-time chat or open discussion via Terengganu.fm is another valuable learning experience for the students. Compared to traditional language classroom, they may implement social interaction as part of language learning activity in their tutorial slot, however, this program allows the students to challenge themselves to discuss given topic in English language 'on air' - with radio listeners as audience. This medium serves as part of authentic learning activity where students gain their confidence in communicating using second language.

#### 4. Conclusion

The notable uniqueness of Let's Talk and Let's Go Global program is that even though the practice of communicative approach is fast becoming popular in traditional language classroom due to the fundamental assumption that it leads to academic achievement, there is a considerable need of other authentic language learning methods for local students. Looking at the potential benefits of manipulating students' current interest (Facebook, youtube, films, songs and et cetera) on increasing students' proficiency level, it is believed that similar practice as demonstrated in Let's Talk and Let's Go Global program is an avenue worthy looking into. It is proven that by encouraging the students to be actively involved in their medium of communication of their choice but through the use of English language, students can be more motivated and reduce their anxiety in using the second language. Therefore, this provides another opportunity to investigate the possible benefits such a practice may have on the students' achievement in school and at the same time gauge the perceptions of the students and teachers on such language practices.

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