

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background of Study

In Malaysia today, classrooms in institutions of higher learning, have both Malaysian and non-Malaysian students. There are 534 private institutions of higher learning in the country offering a variety of courses varying from certificate to degree courses (The New Straits Times, 9 July 2003). As of January, 2003, there were over 22,500 foreign students from 150 countries enrolled in Malaysian private institutions of higher learning. This was a 69.4% increase from the year 2002. Datuk Hassan Hashim, Deputy Director of Education (Private Education) stated that the Malaysian government's target is to have 50,000 foreign students by the year 2005 (The STAR, 12 June 2003).

The question is can the Malaysian institutions of higher learning be able to cope with the influx of foreign students? To cope with this influx, the institutions of higher learning would need to look into counsellors for these students, probably extra classes in English, orientation with lecturers and their peers and the impact international students have on local students. These are just some of the issues that the government and these institutions should be studying.

Some of the issues that lecturers in these institutions of higher learning should be made aware of are the many aspects of cultural diversity of these

students. One of these aspects is, the foreign student's grasp of the English language, which is the main language used in teaching at these institutions. The private institutions of higher learning here, do not insist that these students pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), an internationally accepted test on English. For a majority of these students English is a second language and their grasp of it depends on the teaching of this language in their own countries. For example in Japan and China the focus on teaching English, is on writing. Hence, these students are not able to confidently communicate orally with their lecturers or their peers in this language (Chesebro and McCroskey, 2002). This group of people known as 'communication apprehensives (CAs)' (Chesebro and McCroskey, 2002), should be understood by lecturers as they can benefit from the co-operative learning methods, in order to increase their confidence in communicating and improving their academic performance.

Broader cross-cultural differences in value systems lead to different assumptions about student and lecturer roles in Eastern and Western settings (Becker, 1990; Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Pratt, 1991; Volet & Kee, 1993). For example, Cortazzi and Jin (1997) argue that Chinese students are more likely to view the teacher as a model, an authority, and a "parent," compared to the British view of the teacher as a facilitator, organiser and friendly critic. Chinese students are also more likely to see their own roles as result-focused, learning by listening and reflection. British teachers, however, expect their students to develop independence, engage in dialogue and develop critical thinking. These differing views are likely to result in dissatisfying and unproductive classroom encounters.

Another example is that those from Japan, China or Thailand who believe in respecting what a lecturer says and to question a teacher would be like going against the lecturer's authority on the subject. Hence, many Asian students are apprehensive about asking questions or answering when lecturers question them. This is attested by the many lecturers that this writer interviewed during the writing of this study. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Goons Institute, Mr Thomas Mathews said: "They have difficulty to adjust and are shy to express their wants." He added that many faculty members in his institution too have expressed the same comment.

Cultural influences in the cognitive abilities of a student such as values, beliefs, attitudes and needs have an impact in the learning process (Chesebro and McCroskey, 2002).

Becker states that there is certainly anecdotal evidence that there are large gaps between the expectations of teachers and their Asian students. Common complaints from educators are that Asian students do not contribute to classroom discussions, that they are very successful in rote memory tasks but display less critical and independent thought and that they do not interact well with their local peers. There is also evidence that cultural differences in educational practices are recognised by students. Chen (1994) study of Asian students at Lincoln and Canterbury universities found that 80% cited different learning styles as a significant study problem and that many remarked on difficulties in group discussions with Kiwi students.

The foreign students themselves come from diverse backgrounds in terms of the visible diversity, there are issues such as ethnicity, gender, age, physical abilities to consider. Then, there are the unseen diversities; political orientation, religion, regionalism, family history and many others (Center for Teaching and Learning website, <http://ctl.unc.edu/tfil.html> – Your Diversity, the Academic Teaching and Learning Styles). It is important to realise the values held by a teacher can be explicitly stated, but more often they are implicitly communicated through non-verbal actions. An example is about this United States instructor who shared a story about the confusion of values which resulted while working with students from Bangkok and Hong Kong. “A custom in these cultures is for students to present their teachers with a small gift or token of appreciation to demonstrate the value of reciprocity and respect,” (Chesebro and McCroskey, 2002). It is not unusual for these students to offer their teachers gifts in exchange for the lessons they have learnt. As the value system in the United States is different where such gift-giving is seen as bribery, much confusion developed between the lecturer and students concerned. Also, the interaction between the lecturer and students became quite uncomfortable. As gifts are not seen as bribery in the Malaysian context but it is important to note that values in lecturer-student interactions can be found in many other examples and can affect the students’ performance.

As many of the lecturers that were interviewed at Rima Secretarial Finishing College found it difficult to get foreign students to speak and they said that the students do not ask questions. Mr Bhalan, a Business Practice lecturer

said, “In my subject last semester, 60% of the students failed due to lack of facts, incomplete work and poor explanation”. Academic performance of these students is a serious problem and this is not just due to their poor communication skills.

Learning is an interactive process whereby a student and a teacher interact to get an end result. For this end result to materialize certain activities has to take place. The element involved in this process includes variation in patterns, style and quality (Keefe, 1997).

We must understand that not everyone learns the same way (Keefe, 1987). Therefore learning has only taken place when there is a change in behavior resulting from experience. Each learner has distinct preferred ways in organisation and retention. These learning styles serve as indicators of how learners perceive and respond to learning environment (Keefe, 1987).

Reif (1992) claims that styles influences how students learn and how teachers teach and interact. Each one has certain preference towards a particular style and these preferences are influenced by culture, experience and development. Performance by students in individual subjects can be determined by their learning styles and individual preferences. Different learning styles provides teachers knowledge upon which they can make intelligent decisions about instruction methods to be used.

Responsive learning environment enhances learning skills (Keefe, 1991). Students excel academically when more than one teaching style is used. In this way students not only feel confident but they are also better adjusted and have positive attitude towards learning.

Generally, a typical classroom setting in institutions of higher learning can accommodate from about 30 to over 500 students with one lecturer. In many cases, the lecturer does the talking and the students listen, there is a minimal amount or no debates or discussions. The classroom does not allow much interaction. This traditional classroom setting further discourages the foreign student from communicating with his or her lecturer and peers and to mingle with the Malaysian students.

There is strong evidence that cooperative learning in culturally mixed groups produces higher levels of academic achievement across ability groups (Lucker, Rosenfield, Sikes & Aronson, 1976; Slavin & Oickle, 1981). Secondly, cooperative groups enhance cross-ethnic friendships (Wiegel, Wiser & Cook, 1975; Cooper, Johnson, Johnson, & Wilderson, 1980). Rzoska and Ward (1991), for example, found more intercultural friendship choices among Maori and Samoan children who had been exposed to cooperative rather than competitive group learning conditions in Christchurch schools. Ziegler (1981) documented improvements in intercultural relations among Canadian children of Anglo, Italian, Chinese, Greek and West Indian heritage. In addition, Warring, Johnson,

Maruyama and Johnson's (1985) research found that relationships formed under cooperative learning conditions extended to other social activities at school.

Understanding the differences specific to each and every student's individual culture is an unrealistic expectation (Chesebro and McCroskey, 2002). One way of improving the foreign students confidence is through co-operative learning techniques which encourages team members to excel, succeed and which "help make diversity a resource rather than a problem," (Slavin, 1995).

Having gone through all these issues we can conclude that the main thrust of this study, is to look into the teaching of foreign students and understanding their learning styles in improving their academic performance through co-operative learning.

The study will focus on both foreign and Malaysian students enrolled in a Secretarial Diploma Course which is conducted for the duration of eighteen months. There are twenty modules in this Diploma Course and this study will focus on one subject that is Interviewing Skills, where co-operative learning methods will be used.

1.1 The Statement of Problem

The syllabus for Interviewing Skills is divided into two parts; which are 'Preparation and Applying for Interviews' and 'How to Interview Applicants'.

These two parts will allow the assessment of the foreign and Malaysian students' in not only interacting with their lecturers and peers but also in terms of their ability to use the English language and their confidence in communicating orally in that language.

There are a number of problems faced by lectures teaching this Course. Firstly, the students do not interact with one another and they tend to form cliques with friends of their own ethnic group. Secondly, it is difficult for the teachers to assess the students' ability to understand the subject as they do not communicate with their lecturers. Lastly, their academic performance is poor as they do not query their lecturers on the lessons taught and as the Head of the English Language Centre, Mrs Najiba Ahmad (one of those interviewed) says: "they, are shy to talk in front of class".

Statistics provided by the College Registry indicate that among students enrolled for the Diploma Course, nearly 48 percent are non-Malaysians and 52 percent are Malaysians. The statistics illustrates that the classrooms are becoming more diverse. There are differences in the ability levels of students and relationships among the students themselves. These factors create a unique set of cultural experiences that shapes a student's expectations for communication and learning in the classroom. Also, the differences in the command of the language can have far reaching implication for classroom communication (Chesebro and McCroskey, 2002).

There are significant differences in levels of communication apprehension across cultures in Asia, Europe, United States and elsewhere. It should be expected that one's level of apprehension increases when expected to interact in a different culture. As a result, a person may demonstrate a low willingness to communicate. It is easier to remain silent than to be judged incompetent (Chesebro and McCroskey, 2002). This is seen clearly in the foreign students who take the course.

It is important then to make communication a rewarding experience. To ensure this, a student must have control over his or her success. A student who feels in control of how well he or she will do in a class has confidence. Confident students are more likely to communicate. Ability to communicate enhances self-esteem and paves the way for improvement in academic performance. In group learning, these students will be helping the weaker students.

A lecturer should effectively allow for effective learning to take place. The lecturer must choose a theory and determine which skills have to be taught and have a good foundation of the learning theories and principles. This will widen the intellectual horizon, social, moral and mental capability of the students.

In the Malaysian education context, most of the lecturers ignore effective teaching principles. Most of them still use the conventional teaching techniques such as standing in front of the class and delivering the lesson while the students listen and make reference to the text book or any lesson material used. This

method of teaching and the learning situations at present make students passive and they cannot increase their potential in cognitive or affect ways of learning. Also, they only speak when the teachers asks them to and most times they do not. If there is any attempt to involve the student actively, that activity merely is the purpose of strengthening the teaching process, so that the student can cope with the lessons.

Research into group learning demonstrates that achievements of students who work in co-operative settings are superior to those working in competitive and individual settings. Research also indicates that students must be actively involved in the group process for learning to occur and to develop interpersonal skills like communication, active listening and leadership, (Thorley and Gregory , 1994).

Co-operative learning is when students work in small groups and help one another learn academic content. This method of learning increases self-esteem and improves the student's achievements.

1.2 Purpose of Research

The main purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of using co-operative learning activities with culturally diversified students in the Secretarial Diploma Course in a college in Kuala Lumpur and to study how it can improve interaction, communication and academic achievement.

1.3 Objective of the Study

The objectives of the study is to examine:

- i) how co-operative learning can improve academic performance and
- ii) how co-operative learning can improve interaction among the students.

1.4 Research Questions

Can co-operative learning activities improve academic achievement among culturally diversified students?

1.5 Significance of the Study

It is an accepted notion that effective learning occurs when a positive learning environment is created. According to Johnson & Johnson (1989, 1993), working in groups using co-operative learning activities will lead to higher achievements. This is due to the fact that during group work activities, the members will be able to build a better understanding of the subject matter. Within this session, members will exchange ideas and knowledge which would enhance and strengthen their existing knowledge or schemata.

When social interaction and competence is concerned, members of the group will learn how to socialize and adopt social manners. This statement is

entrenched ideas of lecturers and that co-operative learning methods require much planning, lecturers are reluctant to use these techniques.

In the United Kingdom, for over a quarter of a century, there has been pressure to integrate group-based learning into higher education undergraduate level but there has been resistance. The Robbins report identified this as a pressing need as early as 1964. One reason for the resistance was the entrenched views of many lecturers that such work, “was not appropriate to ‘high level’ academic study at degree level” (Thorley and Gregory, 1994). Hence, it is not uncommon to find those same entrenched views of lecturers in Malaysia.

The findings from this study are not conclusive and cannot be determined whether it can be used for other subjects in the Diploma course in the College as there are many variables to consider such as the skill, cultural background of the teacher and the administrative policies on group-based learning. More study has to be undertaken in this area that is the cultural diversity of students in classrooms in institutions of higher learning in the twenty-first century. There is need to have, for example, a thorough study of the foreign students, who come from Asia, South Asia and even Africa, to understand their cultural norms, their background in terms of class, age, political orientations and many other factors. The enormous cultural diversity of these students would pose a great challenge to the teachers, their peers and administrators of the institutions they would be in. There should also be attempts to study the learning styles of these foreign students and how best can the Malaysian classrooms in the institutions of higher learning be

supported by the findings of the study by Brush (1997) in a Mathematics class, which shows that by integrating Co-operative Learning with Integrated Learning Systems (ILSs) delivery helps to reduce anxiety, hostility, and boredom among the students. This is due to the fact that by working in groups students were able to help one another. Thus, it improves their performance and instills positive attitudes in themselves and towards their subjects. Moreover, such integration allows peer support structures and expansion of perspectives within each group to occur.

It is hoped that this study will provide new insights to researchers and lecturers who teach a culturally diverse classroom and that they would be able to provide a learning environment that would allow the thousands of foreign students rushing into our country, that is conducive and that would build their confidence and character. It is also hoped that this research would assist the College, the government and the institutions of higher learning to rethink their strategies and to support services for these foreign students.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

The study limits its scope to a small sample of the Secretarial Diploma course. As stated earlier, one of the problems is that students are not communicating with their teachers thus its important for lecturers to realise that they would have to initiate the communication process. Because of the

improved to cater for the growing number of foreign students who are flocking into the country. These aspects are not sufficiently discussed or researched in this study.