

HOW COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF YOUNG LEARNERS COULD BE IMPROVED THROUGH ENGLISH FIELD TRIPS? A CASE STUDY IN HO CHI MINH, VIETNAM

Cuong Huy Nguyen - Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Vietnam.

Nguyenhuycuong@vanlanguni.edu.vn

Thi Phuong Thao Huynh- Pedagogical Faculty, Palacky University, Czech Republic.

thaohuynhmt@gmail.com

Abstract

Field trip is an effort to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes through learning experiences to achieve effective performance. The aim of this paper is to explore the advantages of English Field Trips in improving communication skills to children in primary schools and later provide the recommendations on well preparation before and after the trip. Our work is intended to emphasize the range of extracurricular educational offers and pinpoint the methods of teaching English as a second language within a borderline educational activity: field trips. Primary data is generated through questionnaires with children and semi structured interviews with teachers.

Key words: *English young learners, field trips, non-formal education, Vietnam, communication*

1. Introduction

The father of modern pedagogy John Amos Comenius saw schooling as developmentally based and divided into four stages in which the second stage for children ages 6 to 12, was a public vernacular school (1896). Children then would take different classes, including religion, ethics, diction, reading, writing, math, music, economy, civics, history, geography, and handicraft, etc. In The Great Didactic, Comenius also recommended learning from nature, outside school

contexts. If a child is in a school, he argued that learning should extend beyond the classroom and take place in everyday life. He accomplished this acquisition of worldly knowledge by giving students contact with objects in the environment and systematizing knowledge to make it more accessible and relevant to the children's interests and life needs (Comenius, 1896). However, children nowadays have much homework to do, difficult tests and little time for what they really like doing, are the reasons why many of them fail to get involved in further educational activities.

People communicate on a continuous basis at home, work, and school. If we surveyed individuals to determine where the most important communications took place, each person would have a different answer, and each answer would be correct. It is vitally important to know when communication should take place, where it should take place, and why one should communicate. When a child reaches school age, a whole new world of communication is open to him. He learns that there are different languages, cross cultural communication, and gender differences in communicating. He learns that these differences also exist in nonverbal communications. He learns how to express himself and how to accept the expressions of others. The issue of communicating has become more than a tribal concern in our world. Educators have become so involved with delivering the curricula that they fail to acknowledge how they deliver them. Although it is not a racial issue, educators are doing an inferior job educating children.

As a demand of a new education method which can bring textbooks to real world, educators offer activities full of fun and relaxation: field trips. In the meantime, they anchor children in profitable activities which will make them able to communicate actively in a foreign language. These trips have been considered with a view to giving prominence to the motivational element as far as children are concerned because there are no tests or school atmosphere. Such extracurricular activities offering English language and culture courses advertised on the internet represent the starting point of our paper. By exploring the products offered the author intends to highlight the value of such activities and discuss the most common and efficient methods.

This paper is aimed to describe to a type of activity which has become more diversified in Vietnamese society: English field trips for children. It is a valid alternative to formal learning of English. It is a non-formal activity which offers an activity cooperated between the classroom and the outside world. The main point of this paper is to explore the advantages of English field trips in teaching communication skills to primary children in public schools.

2. Literature

According to Pew Research Center, among ten important skills for children to get ahead into the globalized world, communication is the most important skill (90%) to compare with reading, math, teamwork, writing, logic, science, athletic. music and science (Goo, 2015). It may still seem like a stretch to say that interpersonal

communications skills are more important than intelligence. As identified in NCWD (2010), communication skills are the ability to Communicate, Read with Understanding, Convey Ideas in Writing, Speak so Others Can Understand, Listen Actively, Observe Critically, etc. Communication skills consistently rank among the top skills employers look for in a new employee. Helping children improve communication skills will help them advance in their career lives. In fact, certain forecasters predict that the job market of the near future will consist of only two types of people: those who know how to design and operate automated systems, and those with creative and social skills whose job it will be to deal directly with customers (Leung, 2016).

For children, the best way to improve their communication skills is bringing them out of the room with outdoor activities such as field trips which are considered non-formal education. Field trips are recognized as important moments in learning. Their importance is supported by professional organizations such as the National Science Teachers Association which asserts field trips can “deepen and enhance” classroom study (NSTA 1999) and the National Research Council who assert a quality science curriculum is one that extends beyond the walls of the classroom (1996). Classroom learning is not enough to make students an effective learner. The traditional chalk and blackboard technique might turn dull after a prolonged period of time. Moreover, students, especially children, learn tough lessons better when they are illustrated with realistic examples. And what can be more thrilling than school trips to instill a longing to learn more, amongst young students? It creates a curiosity in children to discover new things. Such experiences can teach them more than any textbooks, reference books or study notes. It is a shared social experience that provides the opportunity for students to encounter and explore novel things in an authentic setting. During field trips, children have concrete learning experiences in a real situation which has been undertaken with a specific purpose (Sampath & Santhanam, 2006).

Moreover, some children might be introverts. Others might be shy. Those kids tend to hesitate to mix freely with their classmates and have very few friends. Others might possess learning disabilities. School trips never discriminate between any students and welcome each learner. This inspires them to open up to people they otherwise don't speak to during the normal school hours. They learn how to share food with their peers, be polite in public spaces and ask questions to the museum's curator. It enhances their social skills.

Field trip is an effort to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes through learning experiences to achieve effective performance (Adhikari U, Yadav RK & Shrestha RN, 2012). To find out the mismatch of skills taught in classroom, field trip would be a good exposure. These trips, likewise, identify the need to establish close contacts with employers as a way of monitoring the world of work for which they are preparing their graduates (Isarji H.S., Ainol, Mohamad & Tunku Badaruah, 2011). Frequently, these exchanges outcome would benefit in collecting data to evaluate

and modify the teaching of oral communication skills in classroom. The field trip gives exposure to enhance the existing curriculum studied in classroom and provides real world experience. This is because both classroom teaching and field trips are important. This is supported by Patrick (2010) where students do seem to benefit from the learning experiences that occur outside the classroom. Patrick suggested that field trips should be merged into the teaching schedule as this will offer an opportunity for students to apply what had been taught in classroom. This closeness and approachability would be a key feature of field trips. Therefore, in order to prepare students with competence in oral communication skills, they need to be exposed to real world.

It is important to recognize that learning outcomes from field trips can range from cognitive to affective outcomes (Dewitt & Storksdieck, 2008). Too often, however, only cognitive gains are identified (by schools or museums) (Kisiel, 2005). Among many potential outcomes, research has shown that field trips can expose students to new experiences and can increase interest and engagement in science regardless of prior interest in a topic (Bonderup Dohn, 2011), result in affective gains such as more positive feelings toward a topic (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1995).

Field trips can be designed to more effectively support young student learning. Field trips work best when they provide support for students to explore in a personally meaningful way. Developing a perspective or 'viewpoint' of the external world in the minds of children is an essential responsibility of teachers as well as parents. Children gain perspective of their surroundings only when they venture out of their comfort zone, be it their home or their school where they go every day. When they meet new people and are introduced to a new culture or language, they learn to respect the differences in people. School trips thus make children more responsible, humble and cooperative towards one another.

Learning in field trips is impacted by some factors such as the social context of the visit, teacher agendas, student experiences during the field trip, and the presence or absence and quality of preparation and follow-up. Some trip designs are needed to best support children learning (Stronck, 1983) yet programming that is overly rigid or too aligned with classroom instruction can have a negative effect (Jensen, 1994). If children are not adequately prepared for the experience, the novelty of the setting can negatively impact learning.

3. Methodology

This study used both qualitative and quantitative approaches. A survey was conducted with 20 teachers and 320 children from grade 3 to grade 5 in four public primary schools in Ho Chi Minh city three days after the trip. The schools, teachers and children were selected at random based on their availabilities.

Seven questions in the questionnaire were sent in paper to children with their teachers' support in explaining. Children need to make sure they completely understand the questions before answering. The questionnaires focus on describing

the trip, expressing their feelings, their thinking and their wishing about next outdoor activities in their schooling. The author also conducted semi structured interviews with their teachers to get a deeper understanding on how much better their young students can achieve in communication skills after the field trip. Teachers who join the interviews were supposed to be with their young students during that trip Interviews and questionnaires were prepared and noted in Vietnamese for later analysis.

4. Results and discussion

4.1.1 Overview of English education in primary public education in Vietnam

Elementary education in Vietnam starts from the age of six to eleven. Subjects are Vietnamese, mathematics, moral education, natural and social sciences, arts, and physical education, as well as history and geography in grades four and five. In 2017, the MOET announced that it would introduce foreign language and computer training starting in grade three, and also offer minority languages as an elective subject. The curriculum emphasizes rote memorization and Vietnamese is the only language of instruction. Textbook learning increases in higher grades. Promotion is based on continuous assessment and year-end exams. A final exit examination used to be required until the 2000s but has since been abolished.

The new policy for primary English as a foreign language teaching in Vietnam focuses in communicative competence, which is in accordance with global and regional trend in English language education. Enhancing English communicative language proficiency has become the priority of English training policy throughout Asia Pacific Rim (Nunan, 2003). English language teaching has been implemented at primary level in non-English speaking countries in Asia. These trends have inspired Vietnam to introduce English at Grade 3 (8 years old) as a compulsory subject. This policy is also grounded in and developed from the previous curricula in Vietnam. Since 1997 English has been taught as an elective component of the primary curriculum in Vietnam. Initially, the new policy was piloted at schools in rural areas prior to nation-wide implementation in 2003. This implementation attracted a lot of attention and drew reactions from different social groups in Vietnam. In response to social needs, a revised policy was introduced. Specifically, English is now taught as an elective subject for Grade 1 and 2, and as a compulsory subject from Grade 3 to 5. Primary English language education in Vietnam aims to develop communicative skills and encourage intercultural knowledge.

Although the rhetoric of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training stresses the development of practical communication skills, this is rarely reflects at the classroom level, where the emphasis is on the development of reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar for the purpose of passing exams. New teacher training programs have been designed with a focus on training communicative teachers in a bid to improve the teaching methodology. Unfortunately, not much improvement was recognized in English classes. Moreover,

there is a mismatch between English testing and teaching in Vietnamese education. While teaching focuses on communicative approach, testing means on measuring students' grammatical knowledge. They tend to adopt either TOEFL, TOEIC or IELTS as the key background to measure students' English knowledge and skills which is only suitable for students who are going to have academic studying programs in English speaking countries.

4.1.2 Outdoor field trips in Vietnam

Scott (1985), a member of the Black Caucus National Council of Teachers of English, has noted that language is a barrier in the educational process because of the stigma attached to it, the lack of respect given to it, and the lack of knowledge about it. All of the above factors have been shown to lead to damaged self-concepts of students, low expectations regarding the educability of students, ineffective instructional methods, and sometimes to inappropriate placement of students.

Educators should distinguish and have appropriate designed activities for formal and non-formal education. Formal education involves a government that recognizes the value of and supports school systems. It is defined as "the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded educational system from primary through to higher education institutions" (Unesco 1998). The characteristics of the formal education can be easily contrasted to those of the non-formal education which is organized educational activity outside the established formal system that is intended to serve an identifiable learning clientele with identifiable learning objectives". The features of the non-formal education are: learning by doing, process-oriented learning, learner centricity, participation, voluntary nature (Unesco 1998). The non-formal education differs both in content – which is organized on areas of interest, not on years of study or academic subjects and in the way it is structured: all the educational activities take place in other institutions excepting school such as museums, libraries, etc. The atmosphere of the non-formal education is less rigid than in formal education, although the results are often similar (Mitulescu & Simache, 2008).

The necessity of such types of non-formal activities resides in the nature of the product offered: entertainment and education. Education must be linked with young people developing self-confidence and self-reliance. Time spent learning in nature significantly helps to develop both of these skills. This new found independence leads to better decision making, whether that be outdoors, on the sporting field or in business. Not all lessons can, or should, be taught in a classroom. Students need opportunities to step away from their computers and experience nature first-hand. These experiences allow them to be placed safely in situations where they need to think through the consequences of difficult tasks. To climb, walk and connect with the natural environment in a setting which is foreign, and outside their comfort zone, will create the best possible opportunity to develop their mind and body.

In Vietnam, this product is popular under the form of field trips and workshops. However, there are not many field trip opportunities for young students throughout each school year. Many schools in big city like Ho Chi Minh offer twice per year and the fee is covered by parents. Most of these trips are intentionally designed by tourist companies. Some of them are organized by teachers. They try to extend learning beyond classrooms, provide unique opportunities to learn in a new environment and make real world connections to the knowledge they have gained in class. For English language training purpose, these trips are designed and demonstrated in both Vietnamese and English so that children feel comfortable enough to join.

4.1.3 Findings from teachers

When asked about how field trip can help in communicative skill for children, 83% said that it developed self-confidence and helped bringing the learning that they were doing in class to real life. They got knowledge in class then saw other people talking and demonstrating about it in the trip. This helped more real and they could begin to apply some of the understanding in class in a different setting. They had more things and more motivation to discuss. As stated by Rivers (1990), in interactive language teaching, comprehension and production retrieve their normal relationship as an interactive duo. To achieve this, people need an ambience and relations among individuals that promote a desire for interaction.

The teachers observed their young students after the trip and have the same opinion that 70% of them were talking more than their usual habit. Their communicative skill and confidence improved a lot while they were so excited to discuss about things happen during that trip. They noticed what was around them, what was supposed to be there, and they showed each other things they collected in the trip. They had really interesting conversation after.

30% of teachers also think some kids were even more open to make a connection with their new companions in the field trip. It was just a different environment than the classroom, and some kids did not really see interacting socially in the classroom was interacting there.

Regarding the post activity one day after the trip, 35% of the teachers had their young students a 15-minute quick write about the day. For children who may have difficulty writing on their own, they worked in a group or with the teacher to talk about the experience in their own words. The teacher or a more advanced student can help write down the ideas. After it was written, children would be able to read it because it was in their own words. In small groups students could discuss about a question list "What I liked, What I learned, What I recommend to others, etc." They can share some of the things on their list, and then the class can discuss their answers to the class assignment for the field trip. This also relevant to a research that field trips can help students to have experiences that can be recalled and useful long after a visit (Falk & Dierking, 1997).

Also for post activities, other 45% of teachers interviewed some of their students and asked them to express their feelings. They also realized that children showed their excitement and confidence when talking about what they could learn after the trip. But the rest interviewees (20%) did nothing. They said they did not have time for post activities because they had to rush with lessons in class.

4.1.4 Findings from the young students

In order to investigate the experience in communication by the students during field trip, the children were asked to respond to seven questions. It was agreed by most of them (92.7%) that communication in natural topics were most highly discussed during the field trip, followed by comparing things related to their lessons and things they saw in real world (65.2%), provide response to questions asked by the tour guide (65.3%), daily chatting (53.9%). This feedback lends support to findings by Patrick (2010) that field trip experiences significantly improved the students' understanding of using the language and gives motivation/attitude towards the subject learned at school. This subsequently influenced and increased their perceptions over the use of communication. Therefore, results indicate the impact from field trips can enhance learning and motivate students.

There is a truth that most English language learners have had access to some schooling in their native countries. Their school was probably very teacher-directed. Learners were expected to be quiet and listen to the teacher and then, when asked, to respond to the teacher in unison with the one correct answer. Because of this, some English language learners, especially young learners may be initially disconcerted when their English teacher begins asking them to get up and move around, work in pairs or groups, and talk to one another. It also may be difficult for them to realize that there can be more than one correct response to a question and many ways to ask a question. However, many, if not most, learners adapt and prosper with increased interactivity and independence. Field trip activities encourage them to express themselves freely, open their boxes and join the group.

There was no surprised that 98.3% love this kind of trip. 95% of them think there are very few of outdoor activities for them and want to have it more often in their school time. They also wish to experience overnight field trips with their classmates (56%). Field trip offered opportunity for the student to learn in the real world and fill in the gap between theory and practice. They also said that by doing trip in the nature could open their knowledge (72%). Outdoor learning was related by interaction between people and outdoor environment where students could use all of the sense, get the experience directly from real world and encourage their curiosity and imagination (Orien, 1993).

5 Recommendation

According to the research result, field trips should be organized more often and broadly to all students, especially to children who need more experience to recognize the connection between textbooks and real world. They are in the age of exploring and learning personal and interpersonal skills in which communication skill is the most important. In order to have successful trips which bring many visible benefits to children, teacher should have well preparation before and after trips (pre and post activities). An excellent window of learning opportunity exists immediately after the field trip.

6 Conclusion

According to Byrne (1991), the classic English lesson is considered by to be “non-privileged” which doesn’t offer proper classroom conditions. The approach to language learning can generally be described through the sequence “presentation – practice – production” (Byrne, 1991). We may all agree that variation is the essence of life. Classroom lectures and exams might turn quite monotonous for students, especially young students after a point of time. Humans tend to lose interest in a certain activity that’s repeated for almost 365 days. A nice field trip organized by school could spice things up and act as a much-needed break for learners. Students are exposed to new learning options when they take part in a school trip. Apart from that, their team spirit also receives a boost.

By using the new methods, nowadays trainers help students within non-formal activities to acquire and develop oral productive skills in English, to gain self-confidence and the pleasure to speak a foreign language. The world of teaching has dramatically changed and approaching education through non-formal activities is a reasonable attitude. It helps sustaining the importance of extracurricular education for knowledge and skills development on the one hand, and for the personal growth of pupils on the other. Only by paying the due attention to such non-formal types of learning opportunities will the educational system gain more value and variety.

This study, together with previous related research, proves that school trips equip students with social skills, team-spirit, enhanced communication skills and motivates them to perform better in academics. In such tours, they get a chance to bond well with their teachers and peers and explore the outdoors. So naturally, learning becomes more fun and memorable for them, in such happy-go-lucky circumstances. It urges them to observe their surroundings and develop an eternal thirst for knowledge.

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