Panel Discussion as a Teaching Tool in the EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to provide a comprehensive review of panel discussions, focusing on the procedures for conducting them and the advantages of incorporating them as a teaching tool in the ESL classroom. Despite the limited existing literature on the use of panel discussions in educational settings, this review aims to shed light on the potential benefits of this approach. Panel discussions offer numerous advantages when employed as a teaching strategy in ESL classrooms, particularly in enhancing students’ speaking skills and promoting active engagement. The benefits of utilizing panel discussions in ESL instruction are manifold and warrant further exploration. This teaching method can be particularly beneficial for ESL students as it encourages collaborative learning, fosters critical thinking, and improves communication skills. By engaging in panel discussions, students have the opportunity to express their thoughts, listen to diverse perspectives, and develop their speaking abilities in a supportive environment. Moreover, the Zone of Proximal Development theory proposed by Lev Vygotsky provides a theoretical framework for understanding the effectiveness of panel discussions in the ESL classroom. This theory emphasizes the importance of scaffolding and peer interaction in facilitating learning and cognitive development. By leveraging the Zone of Proximal Development, educators can optimize the use of panel discussions to create a dynamic and interactive learning environment that enhances students’ language proficiency and overall academic growth.

Keywords: ESL classroom, panel discussion, teaching tool, zone of proximal development.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language to students. The teaching of the English language involves four fundamental skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Speaking skill is considered to be the most important skill (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017) and second language learners need to master speaking skills as it is considered to be an important aspect of the learning of a second language (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). However, most ESL learners find speaking to be the most difficult skill to master. This

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leads to speaking anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and lack of interest or enthusiasm to participate in speaking activities conducted in Malaysian classrooms leading to non-proficient speakers of the language. ESL teachers play a pivotal role in the language classroom. Misbah et al. (2017) have highlighted the importance of creating a conducive and supportive learning environment for students. Teachers have an important role to play in helping learners overcome their speaking difficulties.

One effective teaching strategy is the use of panel discussion. The use of panel discussion as a teaching strategy to teach speaking skills can positively impact students’ learning experiences. In the literature search, there were not many studies done on the use of panel discussion as a teaching-learning method (Agarwal et al., 2020). However, Agarwal et al. (2020) believe that panel discussion can be used to supplement routine teaching, having an add-on feature to routine teaching and be used as a regular teaching method. This article aims to conduct a review on panel discussion, the implementation of panel discussion as a teaching tool and the benefits of using panel discussion as a teaching tool in the ESL classroom. For this review, five research questions will be addressed:

1. What is a panel discussion?
2. What are the objectives of the panel discussion?
3. How to conduct a panel discussion?
4. What are the benefits of using panel discussion as a teaching tool in the ESL classroom?
5. Which theory is relevant to panel discussion as a teaching tool in the ESL classroom?

The objectives of panel discussion are: to provide knowledge and new facts (Leh & Melincavage, 2012); to teach learners about the various roles in a profession (Leh & Melincavage, 2012); to help learners overcome their speaking anxiety (Anwar, 2016); to boost their self-confidence (Anwar, 2016); and to help learners become competent speakers of the language as learners get involved in the group discussion (Krishnan & Abdullah, 2014).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions of Panel Discussion

Panel discussions are also known as forums, group discussions, discussion methods and symposiums. A panel discussion consists of three to six persons who have specialized knowledge in an area and have a purposeful conversation with each other on a selected topic. At the end of the panel discussion, there will be a question-and-answer session. A panel discussion has a panel moderator who chairs the discussion, directs the discussion, and controls the discussion so that everyone has an equal opportunity to speak and share their knowledge and viewpoints. Panel discussions are presented in front of an audience. At the end of the panel discussion, there will be a question-and-answer session.

2.2 How to Conduct A Panel Discussion

There are three (3) important parts in a panel discussion. The first part is “planning a panel discussion”, the second is “the procedures of a panel discussion” and the third is “moderating a panel discussion”.

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2.2.1 Planning a panel discussion

A panel consists of panel members, a moderator, and the audience. Panel members should be selected carefully so that they can address the topic/issue presented to them. The ideal number of panelists is between three to five members. It is important to provide information such as the topic or theme and the background of the audience so that the panelists are well-prepared for the panel discussion. In addition, the role of the moderator is pivotal in a panel discussion. Moderators play a significant and prominent role in a panel discussion. Moderators fulfill the following criteria in a panel discussion:

a) moderators are in charge of time management and make sure all the panelists speak within the allocated time,

b) play a significant role by making sure panelists stay on track,

c) make sure all the panelists contribute equally to the discussion,

d) help to clarify any unfamiliar words or jargon that are unfamiliar to the audience,

e) help to paraphrase or link concepts so that the audience can connect with the discussion,

f) facilitate Question & Answer sessions

(Source: Chua, 2023)

Lastly, engage with the audience. The audience must stay focused and connected till the end of the panel discussion. The audience should be allowed to ask questions, clarify doubts, or even express their opinions or share a real encounter with the panel.

2.2.2 Procedures of a Panel Discussion

There are many ways to conduct a panel discussion. According to one research conducted by Krishnan and Abdullah (2014) entitled “All for One: Using Panel Discussion to Improve Proficiency through Group Work, a panel discussion was conducted with 36 undergraduate students comprising 15 male and 21 female students from a variety of programs taking the Academic English course. The study was conducted for six (6) weeks in a tertiary setting. The following procedures were included in the study:

a) Lecture session

Firstly, the students were given a lecture on panel discussion. The lecture session covered various components of a panel discussion including the roles of the panelists and the moderator.

b) Mock session

After the lecture session, there was a mock session conducted in class to allow students to get a better perspective of a panel discussion session.

c) Preparation

In terms of preparation for their panel discussion session, students were allowed to select their group members of four or five and they were informed of their presentation dates. As for the topic of discussion, they were given a choice to select from a list given by their lecturer. The participants were given a month to prepare based on the topic that they have chosen with their group members. They also had to nominate a moderator along with their panel members.

d) Presentation

During the actual session of the panel discussion, the moderator and panelist were seated in front of the class and each panel discussion session lasted for 20 minutes. The panel discussion sessions were graded by the lecturer using the assessment sheet adapted from Staff (1996) which was used for assessing class debates. The
lecturer made some adaptations to the criteria. In terms of the implementation of the assessment mode, the lecturer explained the criteria that would be assessed for the panel discussion. Among the criteria were Organization (4 points), Content (10 points), and Argumentation/Evidence (6 points). The moderators start the panel discussions by introducing the topic and the panel members. After that, the issues to be discussed were highlighted by the moderators. Lastly, the moderators summarized the main points to conclude the topic of discussion.

2.2.3 Moderating a Panel Discussion

As suggested by Kristin Arnold, a leading expert in moderating panel discussions, to moderate a lively and informative panel discussion, one can use the following format:

a) Identify the purpose of the panel discussion – so that you know the aims and objectives of the panel discussion.

b) Select, invite, and confirm the panel members – think carefully before you select the panel members.

Choose panel members who fulfill the DEEP criteria (Arnold, n.d.):

D – Diverse: It is important to have a diversity of opinions so that it is an interesting discussion.

E – Expertise: Choose panel members who possess strong credentials.

E – Eloquent: Panel members should be fluent and can express their opinions clearly.

P – Prepared: Panel members should come well-prepared for the panel discussion.

c) Select and prepare an engaging format. The format of the panel discussion should create more space for a lively panel discussion.

d) Strong introduction – start the discussion with an impressive opening remark speech.

e) Facilitate a lively discussion – it is important to moderate a lively conversation between the moderator, the panel members, and the audience.

f) Entertain questions from the audience – usually, the Q&A session is at the end of the panel discussion. But you can allow the audience to ask questions at specific times.

g) End the panel discussion with a call for action. Every action should react. The same goes for panel discussion. At the end of the discussion, it is important for a change to take place.

(Source: Arnold, n.d.)

2.3 Panel Discussion as A Teaching Tool in The ESL Classroom

There are many teaching tools that ESL teachers can use in the language-learning classroom. The 21st-century teaching and learning emphasizes the importance of using student-centered approaches in the language classroom. ESL teachers play a crucial role in the classroom as there is a constant need to create a conducive and supportive learning environment for ESL students (Misbah et al., 2017). As a result, the choice of teaching strategies and teaching tools can have an impact on students’ learning experience.

The use of panel discussion as a teaching tool to teach speaking skills has many benefits for ESL students. One cannot deny the benefits panel discussions have to offer to language teachers and learners in the speaking classroom. Panel discussions help in the development of self-confidence through an increase in motivation level and improvement in English language speaking proficiency (Anwar, 2016; Krishnan & Abdullah, 2014).
When ESL teachers use panel discussions in their speaking class, students feel more motivated as panel discussions are conducted in groups. Students' confidence level also shows an improvement in their speaking proficiency level.

Panel discussions are usually linked or associated with group discussions as panel members sit in groups to discuss the topic or issue presented to the panel. Group discussions are found to have a positive effect on enhancing students’ speaking skills as they focus on collaborative learning. Panel discussions are conducted in the form of discussion groups, and this gives an opportunity for learners to practice their speaking skills. When learners practice their speaking skills in class, learners overcome their shyness and anxiety through collaborative work. This also helps to boost learners’ self-confidence. The use of role-plays and simulation approaches in the speaking classroom helps to enhance ESL learners’ oral communication (Abdul Rahman & Maarof, 2018; Pinatih, 2021; Rao, 2019). Panel discussions can be considered role-plays as panel members take on roles assigned to them and portray the roles of experts in the discussion. This was also highlighted by Rao (2019) when he mentioned that “the learners play the roles related to their daily life situations that take place in contemporary society”. Role-plays and simulation approaches provide authentic learning environments to students. The use of role-play technique in the speaking classroom is a good alternative as it is seen as a 21st-century teaching technique (Pinatih, 2021). Panel discussion leads the way as learners get an opportunity to find the ability to communicate using practical phrases purposefully. The effects of using panel discussion in the speaking classroom are obvious and significant as ESL learners find purpose and meaning when they engage in panel discussions be it as panel members or audience.

In addition, panel discussion allows for peer feedback. Peer feedback or response is when the panel members receive feedback from their peers after the panel discussion is over. Peer feedback helps to increase learners’ motivation (Krishnan & Abdullah, 2014; Roslee et al., 2019). Usually, in a teacher-centered classroom, it is the teacher who provides the feedback to the class. However, peer feedback advocates student-centered teaching and learning whereby students take charge, reflect, and think critically before giving their feedback. The research conducted by Roslee et al. (2019), showed that positive feedback during the teaching session received positive outcomes from the students due to the increased motivation level. Subsequently, the learners’ speaking results improved due to the positive feedback. This research highlights the importance of student-centered classroom lessons whereby students were allowed to express their views and opinions during the feedback session.

The roles of ESL teachers are paramount in the teaching of speaking skills to ESL learners. Since speaking is considered to be a difficult skill to master for many ESL learners, ESL teachers need to employ a variety of teaching methods to attract and motivate learners to use the language in the classroom. Hence, it is important to implement more engaging and fun classroom lessons so that students will be interested in speaking in the classroom (Rao, 2019). The use of panel discussions in the speaking classroom will create a fun language learning environment as they learn to use the language in a stress-free situation. As noted by Abdul Rahman and Maarof (2018), “The ESL classroom should not be a place which causes a lot of uneasiness and anxiety”. Panel discussions provide real-life tasks, and this makes learning fun and interesting. Since learners are put in groups during panel discussions, they collaborate and practice language skills in the form of group discussions. Harmer (2001) asserted that discussion activities are considered the most useful and interesting form of oral practice in the classroom since
they offer chances for students to exchange their thoughts, talk about their experiences, and express their opinions to improve their communicative ability. As a result, ESL teachers need to plan their speaking lessons carefully before using them in class.

The teaching of speaking skills in the ESL classroom can be challenging and time-consuming. There are instances whereby some ESL classrooms are rather too big due to the total number of students in the classroom. It can be a daunting task for ESL teachers to teach speaking skills to a large class as it will consume more time and effort on the part of the ESL teacher. However, the use of panel discussions in the teaching of speaking helps to involve all the students. During a panel discussion, one student will be the moderator, some students will be panel members. The remaining will become the audience. Even the audience will have roles assigned to them by the teacher as they will have to pose questions to the panel members during the question & answer session. Some students will provide feedback after the session. Hence, almost all the students will be involved and will have active roles to play in the speaking classroom. Panel discussion is an excellent way to instruct learners to stay attentive and serious about the topic at hand because they need to support their opinions with evidence. This encourages learners to be alert and stay focused throughout the panel discussion in case there is a need to answer any questions from the floor.

Last but not least, panel discussions have educational purposes: there is a need for language learners to talk with high cognitive and affective levels about the related topic (Abdullah & Krishnan, 2014). Students speak to each other and use speaking conventions like turn-taking in their conversation. Students can develop their thinking skills when they participate in panel discussions as they analyze, operate, and interpret information rather than mere memorization of facts or details. Critical thinking is important for learners to think rationally when there is a need to provide answers. Students also need to have content knowledge about a subject. They need to read and gather information before they can take part in the discussion. Panel discussion is a useful teaching tool that can be used to foster meaningful learning among students.

2.4 Theory relevant to panel discussion as a teaching tool in the ESL classroom

The theoretical framework for this article is based on cognitive, affective and social strategies in the second language classroom. It is based on Lev Vygotsky’s “The Zone of Proximal Development” theory. According to Blake and Pope (2008), “Lev Vygotsky emphasized the roles of social interaction and instruction. He developed cognitive learning zones. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) requires adults or peers to assist students who cannot complete the assigned task without help”. Students will need help from their teachers and peers to complete the task. Students work in groups within familiar cultural settings to complete tasks. The use of panel discussion as a teaching tool in the ESL classroom is linked to cognitive, affective, and social strategies in the second language classroom.

2.5 The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

The concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) was developed by Soviet psychologist and social constructivist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). Vygotsky (1978) defines The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.” (p. 86).
Vygotsky believed that when a student is in the zone of proximal development for a particular task, providing the appropriate assistance will give the student enough of a “boost” to achieve the task.

According to McLeod (2019), to assist a person in moving through the zone of proximal development, educators are encouraged to focus on three important components that aid the learning process:

1. The presence of someone with knowledge and skills beyond that of the learner (a more knowledgeable other);
2. Social interactions with a skillful tutor that allow the learner to observe and practice their skills.
3. Scaffolding, or supportive activities provided by the educator, or more competent peer, to support the student as he or she is led through the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development)

Lev Vygotsky believes the role of education is to provide children with experiences that are in the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development), thereby, encouraging and advancing their learning (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this article was to conduct a review on panel discussion, the procedures of conducting panel discussions, and the benefits of using panel discussion as a teaching tool in the ESL classroom. As mentioned above, in Malaysia, English is taught as a second language to students. The teaching of the English language involves four fundamental skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Most ESL learners find speaking skills difficult to master. Therefore, Vygotsky’s ZPD theory might provide theoretical support to ESL learners during the learning of speaking skills. Since ESL teachers play an important role in the language classroom, the choice of teaching strategies can help to promote learning among ESL students.

Vygotsky believed that when a student is in the zone of proximal development for a particular task, providing the appropriate assistance will give the student enough of a “boost” to achieve the task. ESL teachers' choice of teaching tools can impact learners. Using panel discussion as a teaching tool to teach speaking skills supports Vygotsky’s ZPD theory. During the implementation of panel discussions, ESL teachers are known as the ‘more knowledgeable other’ (McLeod, 2019) as ESL teachers provide information and guidance on panel discussions. During the preparation stage, social interactions with a skillful tutor will allow learners to observe and practice their skills. Also, scaffolding by ESL teachers during preparation for panel discussions will help learners to be well-prepared to present their panel discussion sessions. With guidance and encouragement from teachers, students can master speaking skills. Thus, the ZPD theory might be a suitable choice as a theoretical foundation to employ in selecting suitable teaching tools accordingly.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This article aimed to conduct a review on panel discussion, the procedures of conducting panel discussions, and the benefits of using panel discussion as a teaching tool in the ESL classroom. To achieve this, the definitions of panel discussion were reviewed. Then, based on the clarified definitions other aspects of panel discussions were reviewed.
The other aspects of panel discussion that were reviewed are the objectives of panel discussion, the procedures of panel discussion, and the benefits of panel discussion as a teaching tool in the ESL classroom. However, this review is based on the general aspects of panel discussion, and not all the theories relevant to using panel discussion as a teaching tool were discussed; hence, future work on other theories that might be relevant is required. As mentioned by Agarwal et al. (2020), in the literature search, there were not many studies done on the use of panel discussion as a teaching-learning method. It is humbly hoped that this article bridges this gap and stimulates further studies in this field. This would promote the use of panel discussion as a teaching tool in the ESL classroom.

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