The Role of Tutorials for ESL Students - New Zealand Perspectives

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Abstract

It is generally known that lectures, as an important teaching form, are widely used in universities all over the world. However, after doing a review of research, Brown (1989, p.458) concluded that this teaching method should also be augmented by other forms of teaching" (cited in Sweeney, O'Donoghue & Whitehead, 2003, p.313,). Thus it is quite necessary to review some other kinds of teaching forms in universities. Tutorial works, which are adopted as a commonplace in New Zealand universities, are very useful elements in helping students better understand lectures and this kind of teaching method exerts a significant role for study in universities of New Zealand. It is just like some people say "Tutoring is an important component in undergraduate education (Encyclopedia of Education, 2003, p.313, cited in Sweeney, O'Donoghue & Whitehead). Since there are various kinds of activities that are often adopted in tutorial works in New Zealand universities, it is necessary to analyze these activities to see the characteristics and the requirements that are needed in tutorial works. This report will review the feature of some main activities that are often used in tutorial works and investigate the skills that are required in such activities from different perspectives. The difficulties for ESL (English as a second language) students in tutorials are also put forward with an investigation about the reason of this problem. Furthermore, some recommendations from my personal point of view will be put forward in order to help those students who want to do graduate study in New Zealand.

Key words: Academic literacy; tutorial works; New Zealand

ACTIVITIES ADOPTED IN TUTORIALS

There are various kinds of activities which can be adopted in tutorial classes. The three main activities that I want to talk about are OAPs (oral academic presentations), discussions and online tutorials. Tutors used to choose OAPs and discussions as two main components in order to finish the tasks and assistant students better understand lectures. In recent years, a new tutoring form: online tutorial is also widely used for graduate studies in universities of New Zealand. The following work is an investigation about these three aspects.

OAPs (oral academic presentations)

"Oral academic presentations...are powerful motivators for improving intelligibility and managing the complex process of academic oral communication" (Graham, J. G. & Barone, S. M., 2004). In the process of tutorial works, tutors always choose OAPs in order to help students better understand the content of a lecture and help students take advantage of tutorial classes more effectively.

In fact, OAPs is an activity of "discourse socialization" (Morita, 2000, p.279). Morita (2000, p.282) points out that this socialization is a "bidirectional process" which means novice and expert may learn from each other. That is to say it is an activity of legitimate peripheral participation. This definition is also put forward by Flowerdew (2000) as an important activity for those people who want to be accepted by a discourse community. Thus OAPs in tutorials can be very helpful for students not only deeply understand the related lectures but can also makes a better understanding of the academic socialization of graduate students in a TESL program through their engagement in oral presentation in their graduate study.

There are many skills required for graduate students in order to perform a good oral academic presentation. Morita (2000, p.302) provides some qualities of a good OAP. As the author points out, a good OAP should contain a concise summary, evoke in the audience interest, have effective style and manage time well.

Such features of good OAPs require students grasp some strategies in OAPs. The first important aspect is the strategies in the process of preparing for OAPs. Students should make a good preparation about what he or she will present and what the expectation of the tutor is. In order to achieve success, graduate students are expected to have three main features: to be critical and analytical thinkers, to work both independently and collaboratively and to combine theory with practice. (Morita, 2000) Secondly, the author and the student should also negotiate with each other about the expectations of an OAP. Since OAPs are used to help students better understand lectures, it is the responsibility of the tutor to provide a model or guide their students to achieve the purpose and the students should also grasp what the tutor expects them to do in an OAP. Thirdly, in the presenting process students have to engage the audience (Morita, 2000). In order to attract the attention of the audience, presenters may use personal connections, communicating a sense of novelty or express their stance. Through these skills, students can make their audience more interested in their presentation. Finally, after the OAPs, the students also need a review about it. Some students use a videotape to review their OAPs. Morita (2000) points out "although this review was not a part of the courses, the student indicated that they learned a great deal from it."

In tutorial classes, since OAPs can be used as a component to complete the lectures and reach the tutor's expectations as well as better understand the lecture, it is quite necessary for students grasp the skills above in order to achieve success in tutorials.

Discussions in tutorials
Discussion is often adopted as another component in tutorial works. It refers to "situations in which 5-25 participants engage in verbal interchange in the pursuit of academic learning."(Brown, 1989, p.458, cited in Sweeney, O'Donoghue and Whitehead). This is an interactive process as both the tutors as well as the students have to take part into this activity. In the process of discussion tutors and students may take different roles.

The role of the tutor can be seen as "facilitators, or knowledge creators, rather than as acting in a didactic role (Margetson, 1999; Cox et al., 2000, cited in Sweeney, O'Donoghue and Whitehead, p.313). Some other investigation points out that discussion is controlled by the tutor. The tutor assumes control and dominates the tutorial session (Teaching for Learning, n. d.). The tutor is the "focal point of learning, as the channel through which all interaction, including questioning, took place, as a provider of guidance and as a summarizer (Sweeney, O'Donoghue and Whitehead, p.316).

On the other hand, students take important effect in the process of discussion. The students themselves felt that "face-to-face tutorials enabled them to bounce ideas around."(Sweeney, O'Donoghue and Whitehead, p.317) It is very important for students to take part in the tutorial classes and make it become an effective way of helping them better understand lectures.

However, after doing research, Basturkmen(2003) put forward a question that what are the differences on interaction in a university discussion group with and without the tutor. The result is that students discuss more actively when the tutor does not impact on the discussion.

Tutorials online
In addition to the activities such as OAPs and group work discussion in tutorial works, another important activity comes into being is the online tutorial works. Sweeney, O'Donoghue and Whitehead point out "internet and the world wide web (www) can be regarded as a part of the shift to flexible learning (p.313). In this activity, tutor plays relatively role and students also felt free to participate without fear of criticism. (Sweeney, O'Donoghue and Whitehead, p.318)

Since internet tutorials have been an educational tool and widely used in modern time in the universities, it is necessary to have a look at the peculiarities of this approach and compare it to traditional face-to-face tutorials as well.

A research by Sweeney, O'Donoghue and Whitehead (2004) provide a number of advantages that online tutorials provide for university students. The author points out that students can benefits a lot from online tutorials because it has " a great number of participating students, reduced hierarchical divides, reduced race and gender based inhibition and encouragement of collaborative learning. (p.320) However, the author also puts forward some disadvantages from online tutorials. For one thing, since online tutorials require students to participate many times over the time period, the comment will be often delayed and it cannot be replied immediately. For another thing, because tutorials are less personal, but more formal and more structured, it can be disjointed and boring for the students who take part in this activity. (p.320)

Nevertheless, although online tutorials have both pros and cons, it is still an effective aspect in helping students finish their tutorial tasks. Sweeney, O'Donoghue and Whitehead (p.321) indicate that "in present study seem to view the face-to-face tutorials as playing an important role in their learning and, while recognizing benefits of bulletin board tutorials, did not believe that they could or should reply on face-to-face tutorials. That is to say, both face-to-face tutorials and online tutorials are useful for graduate study. It is necessary to make a balance between these two kinds of activities.

Difficulties in tutorials for ESL students
The activities listed above are three main components in tutorials of New Zealand universities. However, adopting tutorials in order to better help lectures are not common used in some other countries such as those countries that do not use English as a first language. Thus, some second language students may come across difficulties when they are confronted with tutorial works.

The reasons for the difficulties are various. One aspect maybe comes from the vocabulary problems for ESL students. Coxhead(2000) once points out that academic words are not easy as they are not often used. Although some ESL students have no problem in understanding the

meaning of an academic word in tutorial classes, it does no mean that he or she can use it appropriately in a certain context.

Morita concludes three main aspects that make OAPs difficult to perform: linguistic, sociocultural and psychological. The linguistic problem is obvious because some nonnative speakers cannot make their English as proficient as native speakers. What I want to emphasis here is the other two aspects. The author admits that although nonnative speakers know the conventions of the second language, it is not easy for them to comply with such convention since they are influenced by their cultural background of the first language. Connor once points out that writing is an activity which is embedded in culture (Connor, 1996). I think this view is not only suitable for writing but also for speaking because oral presentations are preparations for writing skills.

Furthermore, ESL students also suffer a lot from the difficulties in a discussion process of a tutorial class. This is because sometimes ESL student cannot express their ideas as well as a native speaker and the tutors' interaction may influence them as well. Thus ESL students should prepare more since they do not share the same educational background as well as cultural valuation with the native speakers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From my personal experience, I benefit a lot from this teaching form. As an international student in NewZealand, I suffered a lot of difficulties at the very beginning of the study because I cannot catch up with the lecturer or even feel confused with the teacher's expectation in a lecture because lack of vocabulary knowledge and culture differences. Tutorials provide me a good forum to discuss with my fellow students and illustrate my own opinion freely. For one thing, I make a better comprehension about what the purpose of the lecture is via preparing and performing for OAPs or some other activities in tutorial classes. For another thing, the more interaction I do in a tutorial class, the better I can do for my writing skills.

My recommendations about study well in New Zealand universities is that we should regard tutorials as an important aspect of our study and effectively utilize this form of teaching through interactively take part into this activity. Furthermore, it is necessary for ESL students to grasp some skills in order to perform well in tutorial classes. ESL students must know what are required in an OAP, a discussion or an online tutorial task through actively take part in such activities and make tutorials a good instrument in helping understanding lectures.

CONCLUSION

Tutorial works, as an important component for graduate students in New Zealand is widely adopted in the universities and exert a significant role for those people who want to achieve success in university life. So it is very important for us to understand the importance of tutorial works. Furthermore, the skills which are listed above for helping perform good tutorial activities are also worthwhile for ESL students.

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