

Application of Soft Systems Methodology in Empowering Graduates' Communication Skills

Ahmad-Tajuddin Azza Jauhar

English Language Learning Center
Center of Fundamental and Liberal Studies,
Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Malaysia.

Abstract: This paper investigates the usage of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as an assessment tool for improving teaching and learning English in Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs). In this study, the Malaysian higher education stakeholders – community members, HE academics as well as the learners themselves – are “the interveners” who create the best solutions of the problematic situation of low spoken communication skills amongst the graduates. By using SSM, it is anticipated that stakeholders involved would reach a common ground in empowering the graduates' communication skills by allowing graduates to use English in a real context involving the community. It is discovered that SSM was able to examine the requirement from all parties by offering them a proper and equal stage to voice out their opinion. It is believed that SSM can help instructors and policy makers of Malaysian HEIs in making a sound judgement in improving teaching of English as L2 in HEIs, and help to increase graduate employability.

Keyword: Soft System Methodology, Graduate Empowerment & Employability

INTRODUCTION

Given the challenges facing the higher education institutions in Malaysia, the issue of the quality of English in Malaysian higher education (HE) institutions cannot be taken lightly. The quality of teaching English in Malaysia has been debated with the evidence of the decreasing of English language proficiency level among Malaysia's university graduates (Al Noori et.al, 2015; Thirusanku and Yunus, 2014; Mohd Radzuan & Kaur, 2010; Noor Azina, 2011). English education, particularly in higher education (HE), has been in the limelight mainly due to the many negative testimonies. Studies discovered that employment in Malaysia is set back by educational and skill mismatch, which occurred when HE institutions produce a new workforce that cannot enter the labour market because of the differences in what they perceive is needed in the market and what is actually needed (Koo, Pang, & Mansur, 2007; Shafie & Nayan, 2010; Wong &

Ming, 2010). Hence, to overcome this problem, this research will identify the needs of the local university's stakeholders namely – community members, HE academics and government agencies – and answer to their needs by empowering graduates for successful workplace function. The data obtained from the study were subjected to computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), namely ATLAS.ti 7.0 and sits within the interpretivist tradition. Additionally, in completing this objective, soft systems methodology will be applied in understanding this issue.

OVERVIEW OF SOFT SYSTEM METHODOLOGY

Soft Systems Methodology (SSM from here onwards) has been the outcome of a huge research work by Checkland and his colleagues to create a general framework, which able to tackle ill-structured problems faced in most of the

interrelationships with their fellows (Delbridge, 2011). SSM is a systemic approach, whereby the systemic view recognises that the parts and internal relations of a system are dependent on its environment (Checkland, 1986; Checkland and Scholes, 1990). Checkland and Poulter (2010) describe SSM as an organized way of tackling perceived problematical social situations. It is action-oriented, whereby it organises thinking about situations so that actions can be taken to improve problematic situations. SSM is generally applied to situations where there are conflicts among stakeholders or where the goals of a system are debatable (Morcos & Henshaw, 2009). In addition, the core aspects of systems thinking are gaining a bigger picture (going up a level of abstraction) and appreciating other people's perspectives. Checkland (2000), in his thirty year retrospective of SSM, affirms that a system can never be studied in isolation, but must be seen in relation to its environment. This approach provides conceptual tools for modelling the system as well as the environment in which the system is located (Tajino and Smith, 2005). The systemic approach depicts the system's environment as being composed of various interveners and active processes that influence the system (Avenier, 2002).

In this study, the stakeholders will be the 'interveners' who are grasping and co-creating the best solutions of the problematic situation of poor oral communication skills among graduates. Applying SSM in this research will explore and clarify meaningful possibilities to be used in HE classrooms in teaching L2 students. Researchers agree that the potential benefits of SSM can act as an intellectual systemic tool to orchestrate and implement change in the real world (Hassan, 2012). The seven stages of SSM is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

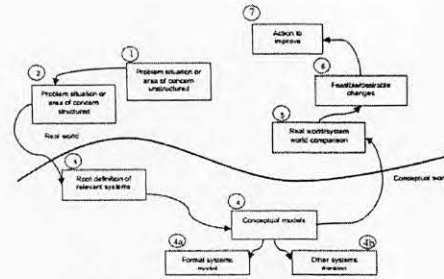


Figure 1 Seven Stages of SSM

METHODS

In stages 1 and 2 the researcher developed the richest picture possible of the problematic situation. The function of these 2 stages was "to display the situation so that a range of possible and, hopefully, relevant choices [of relevant systems to be described in the following stages] can be revealed" (Checkland, 1986: pp. 166). Rich picture was employed as a method of capturing the problem situation; recognising that different stakeholders had diverse views and experience to enhance oral communication skills among Malaysian graduates. Through rich-pictures, such different world-views (known as *Weltanschauungen* amongst SSM scholars) were highlighted. Such pictures could also draw attention to the degree of social interaction and begin to focus on issues which were considered purposeful and critical, as well as eliminating

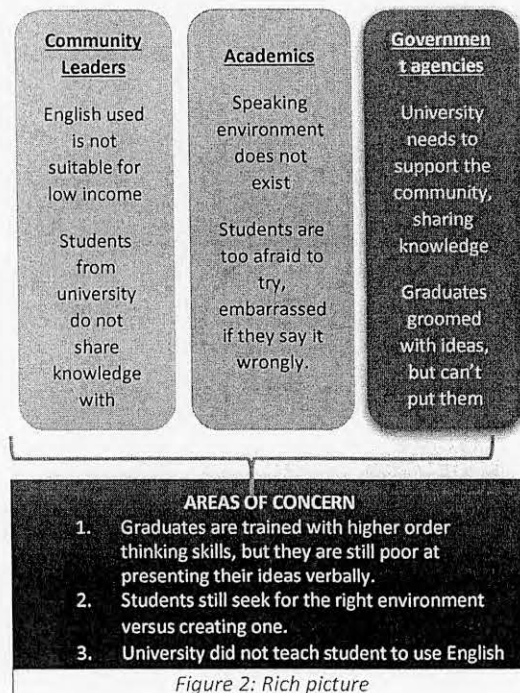


Figure 2: Rich picture

mismatches and disagreement associated with PCS between the stakeholders involved. The rich picture portrayed all the key players involved in the process and presented a structured view by putting into context the factors affecting the process. To enter to its way of working and application, it was necessary to present the rich picture, as being illustrated below (Figure 2)

Meanwhile in Stage 3, Patel (1995) has used SSM's root definitions to identify responsible actors, key transformations and the knowledge resources that are appropriate to the needs of all stakeholders. A root definition 'expresses the core intention of a purposeful activity system' (Wells, 1995) and is structured into three distinct parts: the 'what', the 'how' and the 'why'.

The *what* is the immediate aim of the system, the *how* is the means of achieving that aim, and the *why* is the longer term aim of that purposeful activity (Platt and Warwick, 1995). Another significant characteristic of SSM is that the root definition must include a number of elements, which Checkland and Scholes (1990, pp.32) characterise under the mnemonic 'CATWOE' and the definitions of CATWOE are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1::Definitions of CATWOE

C= Customers	Malaysian undergraduates who are lacked of ample communication skills upon graduation
A = Actors	Lecturers, English language instructors and policy makers in HEIs
T = Transformation Process	Initiate opportunities for students to use English with the locals within meaningful programmes
W = World view (Weltanschauung)	The belief that a well-structured programme would help to empower undergraduate to produce higher quality human capital development.
O = Owner	University, language instructors
E = Environmental constraints	Lack of support from policy makers, cooperation by all sectors are mandatory

The remaining stages are again set in the real world where action can take place. During stage 5 the ideal conceptual model is used to find similarities and differences with the perceived real world model. This has been shown in Figure 3 (the process below the dotted lines). During Stage 5, the researcher leaves the systems thinking (or in this research context, the theories of communications) and initiates the debate concerning desirable feasible changes by setting up discussions which compares the models built in stage 4 with the problem situation expressed in stage 2. As Checkland and Scholes (1990) suggested, in ensuring the whole model works, researchers must focus on the intention of building of the models, which are to – 'debate' (p. 42-43) and 'accommodate' (ibid. p. 28-30). The purpose of the conceptual model is to question and debate whether the activities from the model can be extended in the real world, how well can it accommodate and function, and the debate is also to find if alternative and better ways of doing them could be suggested. Informal discussion and formal questioning were implemented during this study. From various researches, many agrees that stage 7 may seem to be the last stage, but in human activity systems an apparent improvement simply creates a new situation which unsurprisingly creates new problems (Delbridge, 2011; Morcos & Henshaw, 2009; Tajino & Smith, 2005). The SSM model, in good practice, is cyclic and continual. Hence, in stage 6 of this study, one of the suggested activities by the members of community was take on board to see the impact on students' empowerment.

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