

An Experimental Study on Enhancing Communicative Competence of Undergraduate Students through Learner–Centered Activities

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Abstract

The present study is to enhance communicative and linguistic competence of undergraduate students of English literature through learner-centered activities. The subjects of the study comprised of 40 randomly selected undergraduate students of English literature from two Arts and Science colleges located in Tirunelveli city. The instruments used in collecting data are blackboard, chalk, maps from the Atlas as well as from magazines; charts from many books are used, given a few details in the form of a pie-chart, bar chart, flow chart, pictogram, and literary sociogram. Descriptive method is followed to analyse the collected data. The findings showed that the students can learn effectively and enhance their communicative competence through learner centered activities thereby improving communicative competence rather than the direct method of teaching. The course consists of twenty learner-centered activities with five tasks each where the first task has been answered by the researchers and so the learners have to work on twenty activities with four tasks each. As per the results, the researchers have provided their model activities to the faculty members and suggested to use the same according to the needs of their students

Keywords: Communicative competence, group work, pair work, learner - centered activities

Introduction

English plays a crucial role in the day to day life of every human being. It is a global language therefore communicative competence in English is mandatory for the arts and science students. Arts and science are the basic foundations of all kinds of courses that are available in the field of education. Hence these students ought to have communicative competence as they are in charge of moulding young minds into teachers, scientists, doctors, engineers, judges, lawyers, officials in government and private sectors and so on, in near future. Consequently they have to master all the four skills of English, LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) to enhance their communicative competence. Dakowska (2005: 231) claims that speaking is now the most emphasized skill in the field of foreign language teaching, but unfortunately, it also recognized as the most difficult one to develop in classroom conditions. It is a well-known fact that there is a

wide gap between the level of competence in English required by the college students and the one that they actually possess. The conditions under which English is taught and learnt and the reasons for the low standards of English are many. At college level, large number of students has to be given elementary lessons in language. In the current scenario the lone way is that the students can be trained through learner-centered activities. Communicative competence is the necessary skill to do something successfully. Learner-centered activity refers to an extensive variety of educational programs, learning experiences, instructional tactics, and academic-support strategies that are intended to address the distinct learning needs, interests and aspirations of students. The more a student is made to discover the meaning of any activity or project he has been given, the more will be the language acquisition on his part.

Review of Literature

Here is a brief review of some of the research papers in English Language Teaching around the world. In order to satisfy this expectation; only limited number of research works have been done. The current research offers a better chance thereby enlightening the Arts and Science students to be good, better and the best performers in their profession. This paper focuses on all the skills to enhance communicative competence in English at the undergraduate level with its special focus on the learner-centered activities.

Lili Zhang (2016) reported her study to enhance communicative competence through free messaging apps in EFL classes. The aim of the study is to present the feasibility and practicality of free messaging apps use in EFL classes based upon theoretical analysis and situational experiments. Munirah and Muh. Arief Muhsin (2015) observed the improvement of the students' speaking accuracy and fluency by using Task-based approach at SMA Negeri 2 Sungguminasa Kab. Gowa. Baishalee Rajkhowa and Nandhini Borah (2015) investigated the strategies for developing communication competence of engineering students. An investigation on developing communicative competence through language-based activities in business communication courses was made by Reema Chaudhury (2015). Torrico Fabio (2015) attempted a study on Drama techniques to enhance speaking skills. The target of the study is to analyse the impact of drama activities on the development of students through speaking skills and to evaluate the impact of intrinsic motivation. Elkheir Elhaj Mahmoud Omer (2014) attempted is to measure the impact of communicative activities on the communicative abilities of some Sudanese secondary students. Suntharesan V. (2014) investigated in his Ph.D thesis to maintain that TBLT is remarkably effective

in promoting communicative competence among students of ESL. Manel Arroussi (2012) explored a study on Improving EFL Learners' Communicative Competence through Integrating Cultural Insights. Patrick, S.K. (2007) investigated a study on the role of drama in the development of communicative competence among primary school students in Nakuru Municipality, Kenya. Ong'ondo (2003) studied the impact of drama on secondary school students' communicative competence in English. Bang, Young-Joo (2003) explored a study on developing communicative competence through drama - oriented activities in an EFL classroom. Marje B.P. (2002) explored the study to develop communicative competence in English among Marathi medium students at higher secondary level.

The Essence of Literary Review

The above mentioned researchers have explored to develop communicative competence in English through developing any one or two language skills through role play, drama - oriented activities, drilling, pictures, multiple choice exercises, and other learner-centered environments through task based language teaching, motivational talks and conducting events.

Focus of the Researchers

The increasing professionalism and operational mobility have brought in a significant change in the learners' expectations from the language learning courses. That is why the researchers have put forth a course which could help the poor learners to learn practically as group work or pair work as they wish and thereby they can enable our nation as a nation of confident intellectuals. The researchers have chosen learner-centered activities to enhance communicative competence in English at the undergraduate level so that those who will do their post graduate courses may be confident enough to communicate fluently without being shy due to lack of knowledge and their frequent errors.

Statement of the problem

This course is intended for the Freshers at the tertiary level who bring with them eight or more years of English education, and even then find it difficult to use it in real-life situations.

Objective of the study

The present study made an attempt to enhance the oral and written communicative competence in English through the learner-centered activities.

Research Question

How to improve one's communicative competence in spoken and written English?

Hypothesis

This research paper is designed to provide learners to enhance their learning process through learner centered activities which not only cover all the skills required for communicative competence but also integrate them in such a way to improve the students who struggle to learn, speak and write English.

Methodology

The researchers have conducted the study in two Arts and Science Colleges in Tirunelveli city. They had undertaken the study for four months, from June 2018 to September 2018. The researchers met the learners twice a week and worked with them two hours per day. Within the overall duration of four months the researchers befriended, observed and interacted with the learners as well as their staff, provided simple test of skills and evaluated it, produced a course and tested it with the students for her research. The experiment was conducted on 40 randomly selected undergraduate students of English literature who were assigned to two groups, Experimental group and Control group. Each group consists of 20 students.

Methodological Tools

In order to conduct the study the researchers used blackboard and chalk, maps from the Atlas as well as from magazines, charts from many books were used as the researchers gave the details in the form of a pie-chart, bar chart, flow chart, pictogram, and literary sociogram. Simple hand drawn pictures were also used. Graphical representation too was added to the list. Many situations were explained by the researchers to the learners to mould them to the point. All the visual aids and paper clippings cheered up the learners to involve themselves in the study. Nothing is taught, the researchers gave the situation and started the first task herself and handled it and then made the students to come up with the ideas for the remaining tasks in all the activities implemented in the course.

Criterion – Referenced Tests

Evaluation in teaching is inevitable. It plays a central role in the instructional process. Glaser and Klaus (1962) first used the term ‘Criterion-Referenced’ to refer to the type of information derived from proficiency tests. Two different approaches were followed by the language testers. In the first, they are the real life language as a criterion which attempts to design tasks that mirror the real life. In the second type the test checks the abilities required for the successful communicative language use and the characteristics of the situation that

determine the nature of the interaction between the language user and the context. An integration of the two approaches have the analysis of communicative ability through the ‘real-life’ approach, using a frame work of language skills with a wide design is attempted by the researchers through the course.

Assessment

The activities focus mainly on developing oral and written skills. The performance of the students in each and every task in all the activities have been evaluated in this chapter and the scores are marked at the end of every activity. The number of students and their levels of performance are included in the rating scale of all the activities. At the initial stage, learners are unable to express themselves comfortably in English due to their inborn shyness and lack of confidence but they gradually improved day by day in their communication skills, boldness, confidence, vocabulary, idioms and phrases.

Overall Evaluation

ACTIVITY	SCORES	CATEGORY	GRADE
One	16	Not Bad	A
Two	19	Good	A+
Three	20	Good	A+
Four	23	Good	A+
Five	26	Good	A+
Six	29	Good	A+
Seven	29	Good	A+
Eight	30	Good	A+
Nine	32	Good	A+
Ten	38	Very Good	A++
Eleven	40	Very Good	A++
Twelve	42	Very Good	A++
Thirteen	44	Very Good	A++

Fourteen	46	Very Good	A++
Fifteen	48	Very Good	A++
Sixteen	52	Excellent	A△
Seventeen	58	Excellent	A△
Eighteen	60	Excellent	A△
Nineteen	62	Excellent	A△
Twenty	64	Excellent	A△

Fig. 1. An Evaluation table

Category and Grade

1 - 16	-	NOT BAD	-	A
17 - 32	-	GOOD	-	A+
33 - 48	-	VERY GOOD	-	A++
49 - 64	-	EXCELLENT	-	A△

Graphical Evaluation

The activities are given in the X - axis and the scores obtained are marked in the Y - axis.

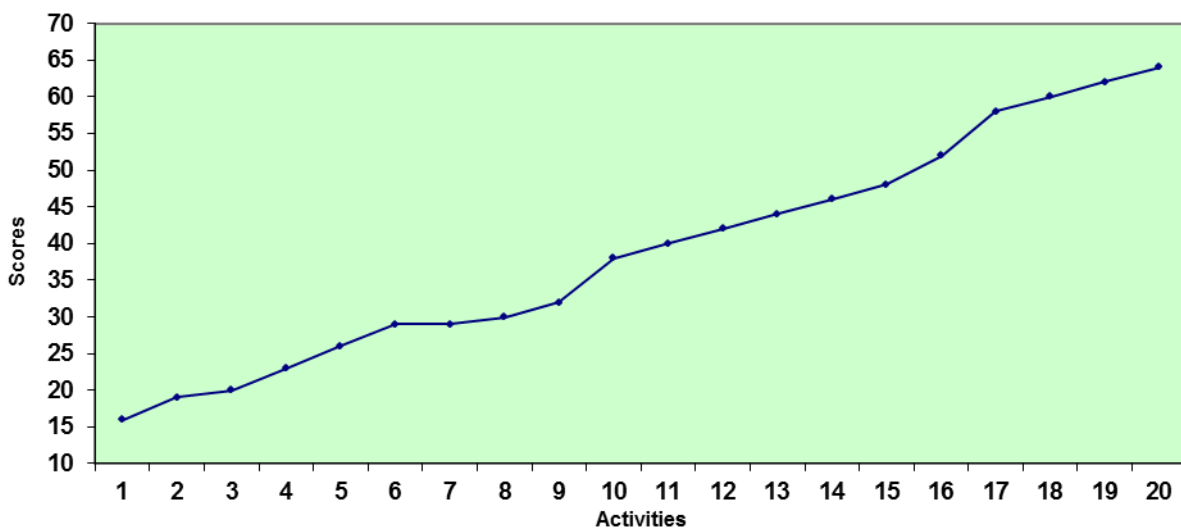


Fig. 2.Graph

Theories used

The researchers have applied some of the aspects found in the theories of Language Learning and teaching methods. Cognitive theory acknowledges the role of mistakes (Dakin, 73). To Dakin, the lessons should invite the learner to make lesser number of mistakes and this has been done in this research. To D. H. Hymes, the word of linguistic theories has two parts: linguistic competence and linguistic performance. In a theory of Competence, acquisition, for e.g: SLA Theory, of competence is essential. The hypothesis states that comprehensible input is the only variable in second language acquisition (B. V. Verghese 216). Chomsky's theory has been redefined by Hymes but with a slight difference. For Chomsky competence simply means, 'knowledge of the language system or the grammatical knowledge'. Hymes feels that a linguistic theory should develop to provide more constitutive role. He argues that the notions of competence and performance need re-definition "the salient contrast between 'the actual' (use of language) and the under-lying. The term performance is to be used to the actual use of knowledge" (Brumfit 13). But 'the underlying' was not properly defined. It is ambiguous and he takes it as ability in the latter part of his theory (Hymes 15-20).

Testing of the Hypothesis

The researchers have used criterion-referenced tests to check the level of competence among the students through her course. The test rubric defines the structure of an assessment and provides instructions to the participants about what they should do (Bachman and Palmer 50). The test rubric includes those characteristics of the test that provide the structure for particular tasks and that indicate how the test takers are to proceed in accomplishing the tasks (Bachman and Palmer 51). The researchers have designed 20 activities having a model task and four tasks for the learners. Each activity deals with a single aspect and the test rubric is given in each and every task. The test has been conducted and evaluated as criterion-referenced one as it suits the design of the course. As it is Criterion-based, the researchers have to give 'A' grade even to the lower limit of scores. The steady progress is seen in the evaluation and thereby according to the hypothesis learner-centered activities have been tested and evaluated as per criterion-referenced test.

Conclusion

From the observation, the hypothesis realization of the twenty activities portrays a steady and gradual growth among the learners from the not bad level to the excellent level. The course enabled the students to sharpen their basic language skills and made them better performers using

integrated academic skills. The results confirm significant improvements in communicative competence of the students in English. Outcomes moreover illustrate that execution of the learner-centered activities is related to the role of teachers, who are the heart of the matter for the improvement in performance of the students. The student community is moulded from different angles to enhance their communicative competence through group discussions, letters, reports, dialogues, hints developing, maps, charts, photographs and so on. Those who did not talk more than one or more sentences together in English were transformed as better speakers. Their fluency is admirable. Those who did not have the confidence to speak have spoken fluently after the course. Not only the oral skill, but also the written skills too have been enhanced. Creativity has improved and an overall development through learner-centered activities. The researchers have applied all the creative ways of using resources in a coordinated manner, so that it may help the learners to provide the best answer to the challenges of the modern world. Therefore the affirmation of the researchers is that the course has been designed to suit particular needs and interests and it provides a good quality education that is essential for everyone.

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