Enhancing Communication Skills in English through Interactive Materials

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the effectiveness of interactive course materials to enhance advanced English communication skills of the learners. The study made use of a railway timetable along with a travelogue to engage the learners in meaningful interaction, which resulted in developing their basic and advanced communication skills. Basic communication skills are the four language skills namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing and advanced communication skills refer to language functions such as discussing, persuading, negotiating, sharing ideas, opinions and views, agreeing and/ or disagreeing with others opinions, etc. Literary materials along with non – literary materials were used in order to train the learners to develop their ability to use the language in various circumstances. An action research project is carried out to train the tertiary level learners in using the language in different situations. The result was satisfactory in enhancing not only the language skills of the learners but also their referencing skills.

Keywords: *interactive materials, communication skills, referencing skills.*

Introduction

Interaction is an essential factor that needs to be focussed in the current scenario. Many recent researches emphasize the importance and relevance of interaction in the classroom. Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and Jean Piaget, a constructivist emphasize the interaction between the human mind and environment (Oates, 1994). Vygotsky believes that learning and development are collaborative and children develop the context of socialization and education (Oates, 1994).

Vygotsky (1978), defined social constructivism as "... the distance between the actual development of a child as determined by the independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in

collaboration with more peers." Therefore, with the help of social interaction, such as getting guidance from the teacher, the learners understand the concepts and act accordingly.

Changes in methodology and materials

ELT has undergone drastic changes in the 21st century. The expedition propelled ELT has crossed several milestones such as chalk and talk method, teacher – centered, learner – centered, task based teaching and learning, communicative language approach and learning – centered. Now the focus is solely on learning and by all means the learners must be able to use the language. Learning – centered classrooms cater to the individual differences of the learners and also their strengths and weaknesses. Learning – centered approach provides opportunities for varied learning styles and strategies, taking into consideration multiple intelligences and the needs of the learners. ELT practitioners believe that learning is process – oriented and not product – oriented. This kind of approach is essential in this era of technology.

Interactive materials

Materials which interact among themselves to reveal and make them understand are referred as interactive materials. Instead of going to the established items of grammar book, thesaurus or appendices, learners can comprehend materials by consulting the other related materials included in the textbook. Interactive materials develop study skills and enhance self learning. Materials can be referred as interactive as they interact with one other and enable the learners to interact with them to be more comprehensible. Interactive materials are designed in such a way that it is pertinent to the learners and keep them engaging. The learners know their progress as they do the task or activity. They receive immediate feedback. In general, interactive materials are referred to e-materials. But in the context of a semi-urban context where technology is not practiced much, interactive materials is of great help to the learners. With a wide range of materials available, the teacher can exploit them in order to enhance the communication skills of the learners.

E-materials

E-materials or online materials are an ocean of materials where learners have to spend more time to choose even amidst irrelevant materials. E-material content is available online globally and is more suitable for adult learners. The advantages of using online materials are the following: they provide feedback immediately and give a global view of the topic given; they help in independent learning and they are individual oriented. On the other hand, there a few disadvantages of using e-materials, viz. they provide objective feedback without considering the psychology of the learner and also they are not suitable for a core program.

Interactive materials as opposed to E – materials

E- Materials have multiple information and will be readily available for the learners.

Though e-materials enhance their knowledge horizon, they confuse the learners of what to learn. E-materials make the learners grope in darkness in what to choose and what not to choose. With relevant choices, a course book can be designed to give essential information as well as opportunity for referencing. Material producers must diagnose the needs, the mental make-up of the learners of certain age group and the level and amount of concepts that a learner of a particular group can take it. It is very challenging for the material producer to take account of all the above factors and prepare a text book using interactive materials.

The study demanded the learners to do home assignment on specific topics which forces the learners to consult e materials to get a global view of the topic. The study does not disregard the use of e-materials completely, but it stresses the importance of interactive materials at the beginning of the programme and slowly moves towards the consultancy of e-materials. Therefore, interactive materials are more suitable for beginners and for advanced learners, e-materials are appropriate provided the learners know how to choose the relevant materials.

Research questions

- Can the proposed interactive materials help the learners to enhance their communication skills?

- To what extent will an interactive course be effective on the learners?

Research Statement

The primary aim of this research is to study how the interactive course materials enhance advanced communication skills of the learners by involving themselves in meaningful interaction.

Hypothesis

Interactive course materials used for teaching English at the tertiary level enhance the communication skills of the learners.

General objectives

- The communication skills (LSRW) of the learners will be enhanced.

- They are encouraged to involve in the classroom activities.

Specific objectives

- Learners will comprehend the text given for listening and answer the questions.

- They will be able to comprehend the reading text (here, railway timetable) and answer the questions.

- They will be able to use appropriate words to describe a place in speaking and writing.

Description of the cohorts

The target group is the Undergraduate rural learners. They are socially, politically and linguistically disadvantaged. Out of thirty five, ten are first generation learners.

Materials & Methodology

The present experimental study uses the

principles of Andragogy and not pedagogy. These materials used in the study are practised to make the learners independent. Even after learning English for more than twelve years, the learners are not able to attain proficiency. In order to bridge the gap, the research employed interactive materials.

A short term programme with thrust on LSRW skills was planned and executed. The materials chosen were Vinu Abraham's *Floating Fantasy* and a railway timetable. The learners were asked a few questions about a place they visited, and the memorable experiences they had during their visit. Then they were given the differences between picnic, excursion and tour. They were asked to list the words used for describing places, travel, etc. through a brain storming session.

The learners were asked to listen to the travelogue by Vinu Abraham titled *Floating Fantasy*. A few questions were asked from the passage to check their comprehension. They were given a railway timetable and they had to scan for information from the timetable. An exercise was given based on the railway timetable. They were asked to choose a tourist spot and take up a role of a tourist guide and describe the place. Having the text as a sample, the learners were asked to write about a place they visited. They consulted the railway timetable while performing role play and describing a place. (Refer appendix)

Main and sub-skills

Listening, speaking, reading and writing are the main skills focused. The sub-skills of listening include listening to descriptions and a short account of experience for details. The following are the sub - skills of speaking – sharing experiences, describing places and incidents, choosing exact words to describe. The sub-skills of reading include scanning for relevant details and reading for local comprehension. The sub-skills of writing include description of a place and tourist spots using cohesive devices. They also learn appropriate words to use for travel and tour and also descriptive words. Besides these, they refer the text and a railway timetable and use them when required. On the whole, the learners apply their knowledge of LSRW skills along with thinking skill to complete the activity by working individually and in groups.

Analysis of the material

The materials used are a literary text – *Floating Fantasy* and non literary material such as a railway timetable from newspaper. The learners are expected to consult the materials when they are given each activity. For example, the learners consulted the text which is about the experience of the author and used it as an example to describe their own experience and also while acting as a tourist guide. Interaction takes place within the materials, among the learners, between learners and materials and between learner and teacher.

This short term programme enables the learners to use the language. Their use of the language does show a significant improvement. However, factors such as

motivation and attitude of the learners affect the learning process but were worked on by continuous practice. The learners' thinking skill along with their basic and advanced communication skills is honed.

Findings

The findings of the study are listed below:

• Learners involved themselves in the activities. However, factors such as lack of proper motivation, attitude and fear of ridicule were predominant in the beginning which was reduced at the later stage.

• The learners referred to the travelogue *Floating Fantasy* and used it as a scaffolding to speak about a place.

• They shared their unforgettable experiences they had during their travel. This activity lengthened their noun and verb phrases and also enabled them to use the language without any hindrance.

• Role play enabled the learners to work in groups and each of them took turns to describe places.

• The activities enabled the learners to consult and cross refer the materials in order to speak and write. The same material was used to teach three skills. Their creativity and critical thinking faculty are honed.

• They learnt the differences among picnic, excursion and tour. They learnt to speak and write about their favourite place. They used persuasive language and details to their description about a place when they took up the role of a tourist guide.

• Constant repetition and exposure to a particular topic enabled the learners to be refined, clear and precise in their responses. The skills are integrated in the following order – listening, reading, and speaking and writing.

• The general objective was to make them involved in the process of teaching and learning which was fulfilled at the end of the programme.

• When learners are given opportunities to use the language without many restrictions, their communication skills are enhanced as a result of their creativity.

• It is found that interaction with the materials and other learners play a major role in language learning.

• Learning takes place when the classroom climate is conducive.

• Immediate feedback of the learners' performance and the learning process enhances learning and active involvement in the tasks.

• Since most of the learners do not have an opportunity to use the language outside the classroom, they were not exposed much to English. In that case, they tried to use their mother tongue which is again seen as a hindrance in language learning. Besides these, their political, social and linguistic level affects language learning.

Conclusion

Learning happens when it is of relevance to

the learners. Also learning a language takes place only if there is meaningful interaction. The learners must be involved in the teaching learning process and the teacher takes up the role of a facilitator in making the learners to participate in classroom activities and also promote interaction. Interactive materials enable the learners to use the language by enabling them to consult the materials and use them in contexts.

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